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SCIENCE · FICTION · MAGAZINE

MARCH 1986
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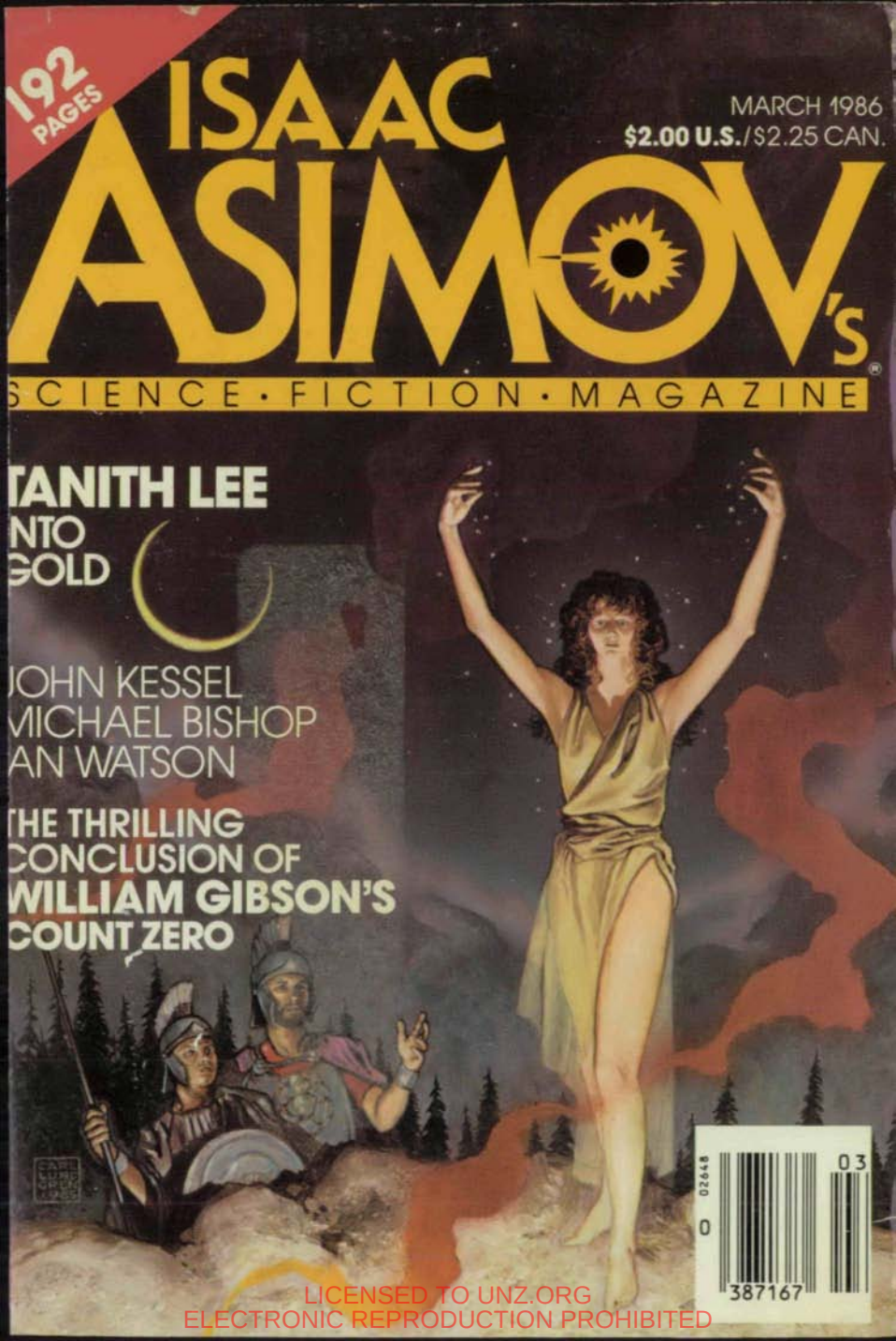

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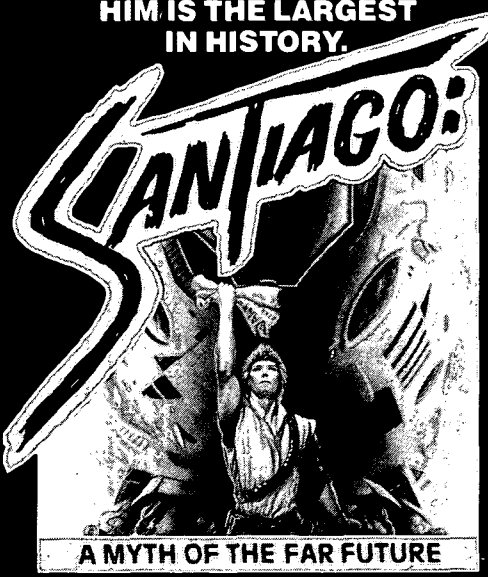

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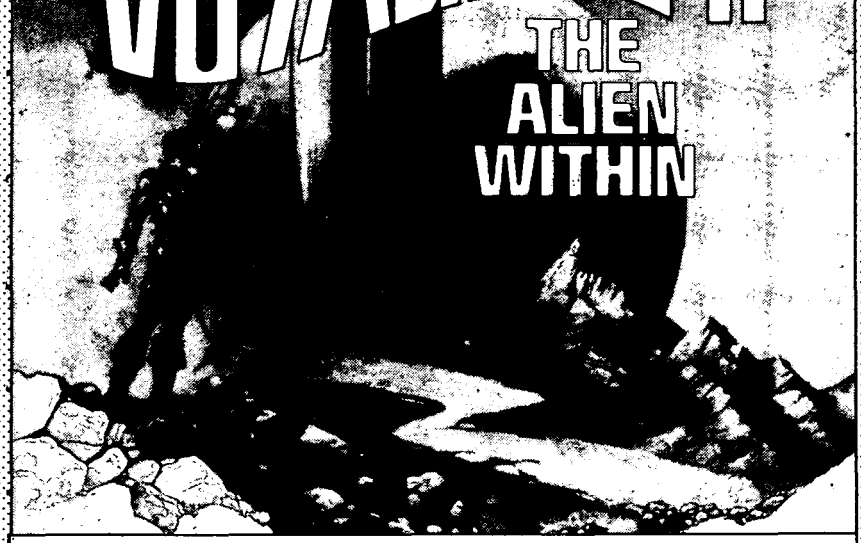

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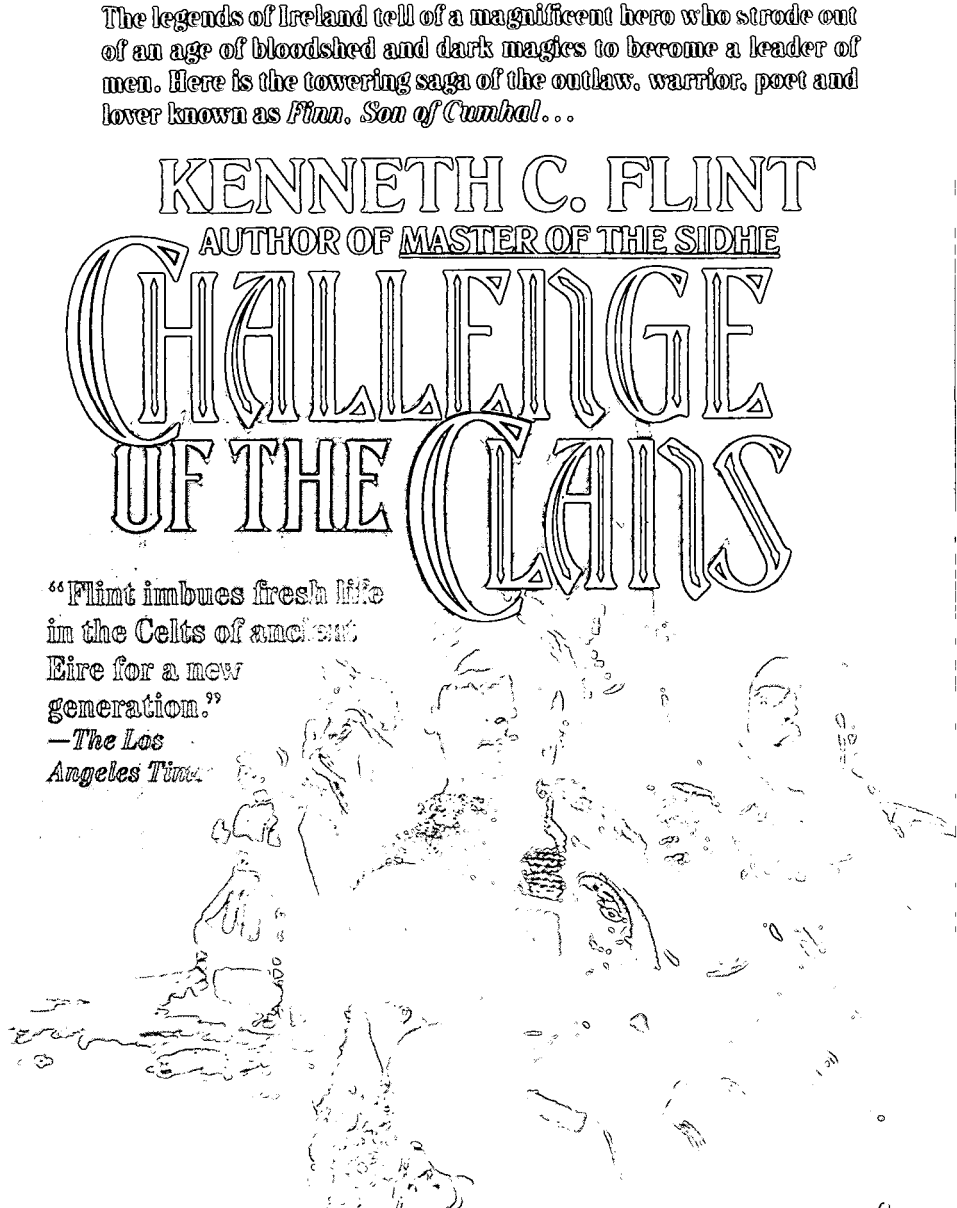

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

PERSONA

The ancient Greek actors wore masks when they played their parts. There were several reasons for this. I have heard it said (but don't know if it's true) that the masks acted as voice amplifiers, which in open-air amphitheaters, without the advantage of microphones, might well have been necessary. Then, too, the masks were so formed as to present the esséntial information concerning the character. The audience was too far away to see the minutiae of expression we can now see on a bloated screen, so the mask told them what they needed to know.

The masks could be moving, too. In *Oedipus Rex,* the Theban king, Oedipus, would surely be shown with a mask that marked the noble, serene regularity always found in the Greek representations of their gods and heroes. When, however, in the last scene, Oedipus has plucked out his own eyes (off-stage, of course), he would appear again in a mask distorted to show tragedy, and painted to indicate blood coursing down from empty eyeholes. The audience would then have all the grisliness it needed to get the catharsis Aristotle thought true tragedy should give.

The Latin word for these theatrical masks (and we still see them representing the theater in two forms—the tragic with opened downturned mouths, and the comic with open upturned mouths) was "persona." The word is still used to represent a public character carefully cultivated by someone in order to mask the real "person" underneath.

Why should any such persona be developed? The most common reason is that of the Greeks—because one is playing a part for a living. Because one is in show-business, in other words.

The most successful persona I know of (at least, in my own opinion) was that of Jack Benny. For decades, on radio, in the movies, and on television, he cultivated the persona of a vain person of no ability, distressingly self-centered, and impossibly stingy. He did this so continuously, so three-dimensionally, and so persistently that the

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persona was universally taken for the person. As a person in real life, he was forced to be unusually generous because he knew that everyone took it for granted he was cheap. He was actually a modest, warm character loved by all.

But then why did he choose a persona that seemed to be without redeeming value? Because he had made a discovery that few comedians seem to have found (or could bear to use if they had found it). Benny made himself the butt of the jokes. Everyone on the show got the better of him. Everyone else got the laughs—at his expense. The result? There was no way of being angry or annoyed with him, since he always got his comeuppance and didn't need anything else from us.

In fact, he got his so thoroughly that the audience had to balance the scales. For all his impossible vanity and abhorrent cheapness, they found themselves forced to love him.

What is all this leading up to? Well, rather to my astonishment I find that I am accused of having developed a persona. At least, I have received a letter of accusation, and where one person thinks so, others may concur.

The letter was inspired by my recent essay "The Little Tin God of Characterization" (*IAsfm*, May 1985) in which I maintained that in science fiction, at least, ideas were more important than characterization. Most of the letters I received as a result disagreed with me, but only one really startled me.

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That was by Michael T. Folie of New York City, whose letter I did not print because it was entirely too complimentary. (Yes, I know I'm supposed to lap up flattery—and I do, but only in secret.)

He scolded me for even bothering to answer those who criticized me, and for letting myself be brainwashed into thinking I was not good at characterization. He says: "I think that you have poured all of your considerable ability to create character into creating the one character that you will ever need. That character is, of course, the Good Doctor, Dr. Isaac Asimov. You have created this persona and it is one of the most vibrant characters in science fiction."

I wish I had created the Good Doctor, as accused. How clever that would have been of me. I would have repeated Jack Benny's feat of deliberately designing a set of characteristics that would force people to react to me in such a way as to enhance my career.

But I can only say, "Not guilty, my friends, not guilty."

The most obvious fact about me is that I am a prolific writer and seem to write with equal ease in fiction and non-fiction, for children and adults, and on almost every subject under the sun. This, however, is not something I can fake or pretend or assume as a deliberate persona. It is a fact and, let me tell you, it's the result of hard and unremitting labor. I enjoy writing and find it easy, but no matter how joyfully and easily I write, turning out 333 books is a very time-consuming and thought-consuming process. I'd hate to have any one think all those books were merely a device to attract favorable attention.

There are other more superficial qualities I seem to possess, however, that might be deliberately assumed. For instance, I never seem to grow tired of talking about myself and my writing (witness this editorial). Have I purposefully adopted this pose of self-absorption or, if you like, vanity?

I don't think so. It comes with the territory. How can anyone be a professional writer without thinking highly of himself? A writer must believe *from the beginning* that publishers and readers would be willing to pay him for his thoughts and for his mode of expressing them. Consider what a piece of conceit this is! A modest writer is a contradiction in terms. If a writer were modest he or she would (like Emily Dickinson) hesitate to offer anything for publication.

The fact is that I know many writers and I don't think any one of them is modest about his or her writing. He or she may be modest about everything else, but not about his or her writing.

Of course, they may *pretend* to be modest, and cultivate the "aw, shucks" attitude, but then *they* are creating the persona.

I admit that I do more talking and writing about myself than anyone else in the field does and that

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I am more open about the fact that I like my stuff and more freely admit that I am a hot-shot writer—but I just happen to be cursed by a complete lack of self-consciousness, and always have been. It does not embarrass me to say what I consider to be the truth just because it would sound conceited. To me, there is no attitude more tedious and useless than that of false-modesty. It is unconvincing and irritating, whereas what I call a "cheerful self-appreciation," when it is well-earned, as in my case, has at least the virtue of being open and honest.

So my self-absorption is me, not my persona.

How about my well-known quality of being "suave" with women. It's true enough. I am very fond of women generally, and I take advantage of my position as a minor celebrity and of my gray hairs to flirt outrageously. Believe me, there's nothing of pretence about it. That's me, not my persona.

Nevertheless, I have received the following letter from someone calling himself "Pro Bono Fandom." There is no hint as to the true identity of the writer and I will not speculate. To be sure, the stamp on the letter is from Sri Lanka but the only person I know in Sri Lanka is a minor writer named Arthur C. Clarke, whom I don't suppose anyone else has ever heard of. "Pro Bono Fandom" writes:

"For years the Good Doctor has claimed to be one of the world's great lovers; it's time to put the record straight. At vast expense, considerable difficulty, and no small risk, a devoted group of private investigators has been following the G.D.'s trail of havoc at numerous science fiction conventions, and interviewing the disappointed, distraught, or relieved victims of his machinations. Here are some of their comments:—

1. I fell asleep first.
2. He lectured me on genetics for two hours—then *he* fell asleep.
3. Isaac who?
4. The sonofabitch! He said he was John Norman.
5. I didn't notice: I was reading an Arthur Clarke book.
6. I had such a laughing fit he got worried and called a *real* doctor.
7. Autograph hunters knocked on the door, so he forgot me.
8. Janet had a spare key.
9. He had an idea for a short story.
10. Carl Sagan phoned.

Is it necessary to give any more examples to expose this *soi-disant* Don Juan? Let's hear no more of his preposterous claims!"

—Well, how do I explain this bit of character-assassination. Without trying to guess at his identity, I would suppose that Pro Bono Fandom is three years older than I am, thirty years balder, and three hundred years uglier—and is simply corroded with envy at the way the young ladies flock about me. ●

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LETTERS

Dr. Asimov:

This letter is in response to the Viewpoint by Norman Spinrad in the June '85 issue of *IAsfm*. The first thing that came to mind when I read your response request at the end was your editorial "Symbolism" in the same issue.

I am not satisfied with either end of the "characterization" vs "ideas" spectrum (or happy/sad endings, or . . .). I like to read stories that have more than one level, though the deeper levels are only enjoyable if the surface levels are also enjoyable.

If a writer concentrates on "Characterization" (with a capital "C") at the expense of "Ideas," the story can have but few levels. Flip side, if "Ideas" are given total control, my interest in the story itself will fade, causing my mind to wander off the ideas.

Sometimes I read a story and don't want to know about any deeper meanings because I don't have the mental energy to enjoy puzzling them out. The surface story needs to have good characterization to allow me to enjoy reading without digging. At another time I might read the same "story" with a desire to find all the "Story" hiding behind.

An example is the Space Trilogy by C. S. Lewis. "Out of The Silent Planet," "Perelandra," and "That Hideous Strength" are each enjoyable reading as stories, but also enjoyable as thought provokers. The character Ransom is used to portray and develop ideas and allegories about Christianity without using the (stale?) often used symbols, yet always a delightful mix of references to scripture passages with patterns out of the myths of pre? non? Christian northwestern Europe.

What I enjoy in *IAsfm* are **GOOD STORIES.** Stories that are good on the surface and also have an important idea that is presented well. That kind of story is one that I'll want to re-read. That kind of story was the deciding factor in my getting a subscription to *IAsfm*. That kind of story is what keeps me reading *IAsfm*.

I leave the decision of what ideas are important up to the writers. It is part of their job to convince me of that importance. Whether I agree with the author's interpretation or not, if I've been given an opportunity to ponder on a well presented idea, then the story is that much more enjoyable.

There you have it. My vote that the editors keep up their excellent work locating and choosing stories that have both "characterization"

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and "ideas," rather than trying to swing to either extreme.

Jesse Chisholm
Dubuque, IA

I assure you I don't want either extreme either. I'm just somewhat to the idea-side of center, that's all.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir,

I have been a sci-fi reader for some forty-five years. I have read some excellent, some good, and a lot of bad sci-fi in that time. I have taken very few subscriptions to magazines or books during these years, preferring to buy what I wanted, when I wanted it. However, I did recently subscribe to one called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. I thought that my sons, who are also avid sci-fi readers, and I would enjoy having a monthly issue at hand of something edited and approved by you because of your reputation. I have always felt that the best guide to reading is what the various writers have written previously, plus their reputations.

I received the first issue (August 1985) a few days ago and sat down to enjoy it. The first story was good, I thought, the next three so-so. The final story, though, was another matter. In my opinion, I have never read anything else with quite the grasp that this story had on repulsiveness. I consider it to be trash, tripe, the ripest of crap, with absolutely no vestige of redeeming value.

How could something such as "World War Last," which I feel should not have been allowed in the cheapest, sorriest book ever to come off a press, *ever* be allowed in a sci-fi magazine? Equally important, how could *you* endorse it?

As you might have guessed by now, I intend to place a large CANCEL across the invoice from the magazine company. I have already canceled my previously held notion about reputations.

Sincerely,

O.C. Jolley

The most delightful part of our Constitution, in my opinion, is that you are entitled to speak your mind and we may freely help you spread the word. But, by the same token, we can't very well forcibly close Norman Spinrad's mouth if he writes what we consider a powerful story, simply because we know well it will offend some of our readers. I'm sorry you are canceling, but we don't aim to put out a censored magazine, even if everyone cancels.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and staff:

There is good news and bad news. First, the good news. Your magazine is the favorite reading for both me and my children. It is loudly fought over by the three of us as soon as it is in the door. Generally the first thing that I read is Martin Gardner's article. I do miss the puns which in the early issues were placed as traps for the unwary. Perhaps you could give a couple of more pages per issue to be divided as Dr. Asimov sees fit between his editorial comments and any suitable puns he could drag up from his lowlife friends.

And now the bad news. In recent

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months I have found that it was taking much longer for me to get through each issue. A little investigation comparing an old issue with a new one disclosed the reason. You guys have changed your typeface. You appear to be using the same number of lines per inch but the pitch looks slightly smaller and the characters are definitely shorter and much less bold.

One of the disadvantages of having become an older science fiction reader is that my eyes are not what they used to be. This change has put your magazine in the same category as much other reading matter. The physical effort required to get through it is not worth the pleasure I get from it. Is there a large print edition of *IAsfm* available and if so how do I get hold of it? I would miss your fine artwork but I could at least get the story. If not would you please consider going back to the original size of typeface.

My comment on the argument about whether a story is really "Science Fiction" and thereby merits inclusion in your magazine: In borderline cases go for the good story! We can all stand to have our reading horizons expanded.

Sincerely

Jerry Radcliffe
Oswego, NY

Well, the change in typeface was more or less forced on us, but, in general, I sympathize with your problem. I notice that each edition of the telephone book seems to have smaller and lighter print; each successive New York *Times crossword puzzle has harder to read numbers. Worse yet, my old* Webster's Unabridged, 2nd Edition, *which I've had for decades has grown lighter and smaller print with the years. I don't know why this is.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac

I, not as handy with words as you are, would like to add some comments to this nuclear war situation. I wish to show that the situation is more complicated than most people imagine.

In general I agree with your assessment of the so called "star wars" project, at least as it relates to direct confrontation between the two big powers.

I claim to be conservative (yet we agree). I try, though, to re-define the word. I disagree with the practice of classifying hawks and extremists as conservatives.

I cannot claim any expertise on the subject except for a longer time of independent thought and study of related subjects than almost any one. In World War II I was a common soldier.

Should the "star war" defense system be put in place and be believed in, it should tend to make nuclear wars smaller. It will not eliminate them and a war within Europe would be possible.

The main point I wanted to make in this letter is the fallacy of disarmament. Those that preach disarmament as an answer have not thought very deep. They express worry about the "arms race." They don't explain what is so worrisome about it. Perhaps vaguely they think the arms race will somehow reach a climax—some day. I see the arms race as benign.

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Years ago there were adequate weapons to fight a war. Now there are too many. Of course at the time there was a reasonable number with which to fight a war—the other side had less than we had. The most dangerous situation is apt to be equally matched contestants. This is a fact neglected by those that claim to be working for peace.

At present M.A.D. is working. Should disarmament proceed, I see no stage where the likelihood of nuclear war is going to be less than it is now. Perhaps the danger of nuclear war will increase.

Of course a war in which the nuclear explosions are counted in tens instead of thousands might make nuclear war seem more acceptable. Nothing is simple.

Donald Carl
Boston, NY

Well, many people worry about the radiation danger involved in nuclear power stations. It seems to me that the amount of radioactive waste produced by nuclear weapons manufacture is much greater and yet it is apparently considered unpatriotic to worry about it. My own feeling is that the endless piling up of nuclear warheads in the world is a great danger even if none of them are ever used in anger.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs,

Being an avid amateur astronomer and semi-professional, I greatly enjoyed Martin Gardner's August quiz. However, I would like to quibble about a couple of points.

I believe you will find that Venus does not always present the same face to the Earth, but merely that it presents nearly the same face each time it is closest to our planet. The match is not exact, and the Earth-Venus lock explanation is now in doubt. Due to Venus' proximity to the sun, the pull of solar gravity probably slowed the planet's original rotation until it became a one-face world with respect to the sun. Some astrophysicists now feel that Venus' current retrograde rotation may be due to atmosphere thermal tides which act to increase the rotation rate in this sense. The current rate of rotation may be chiefly determined by a balance between thermal tidal winds and solar gravitational tides.

My second point concerns Mr. Gardner's explanation of far-side tides. I have always objected to using centrifugal force as an explanation. For one thing, centrifugal force is a pseudo-force and never really explains anything. In the case of tides, the situation may be understood by examining the differential gravitational pulls on the nearside water, the solid body of the earth, and the farside water. This is the approach usually used in college physics and college astronomy majors' texts. A close look at the dynamics, using this approach, explains other features of the tides as well.

Well, farewell from an eternal kibitzer. Please don't mind me too much, I've been a faithful reader since day one.

Susan C. Smith
Ballston Lake, NY

The bit about the supposed Venus gravitation-lock to Earth is new to

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me, but sounds very sensible. I have never thought Earth's gravitational field could possibly be strong enough to put a lock on Venus. As for tides and "centrifugal force," I'm with you all the way.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I feel I must object strenuously to one thing about T. Coraghessan Boyle's "On for the Long Haul" . . . and you are the reason for my complaint! I refer to the blurb at the beginning of the story in which you seem to apologize for the story because (I suspect) you realize it's not what some folks would consider SF. I don't recall seeing a similar blurb on any of your magazine's other stories in the two years I've been subscribing. My complaint is that you should have to defend such a fine piece of literature at all. I imagine you'll get plenty of howls and wails from other fronts anyway, and I find that a bit sad. You claim to direct *IAsfm* toward a generally adult readership, yet I have to wonder at times just how "adult" some of the readers are; especially the readers who yell "foul" whenever something is printed within your hallowed pages that is somewhat off the beaten track with regard to SF.

Well, this time I'm hollering "foul," and what's more, I hope you continue to find and print these little jewels from time to time—without a qualifier at the beginning of the story!

Other than that, keep up the good work.

Bernie Wingerter
Des Moines, IA

We seem to live in an age of warnings; usually fraught with good intentions. There are the warnings on packs of cigarettes, which should be much stronger. There are the ratings system on movies, which tell kids the G pictures to avoid and the R pictures to sneak into and so on. You can always ignore any warnings we put into a blurb. It happens very rarely, after all.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your editorial "Star Wars!" strengthened my occasionally wavering belief that there may be some hope for our future as a nation. The scarcity of such reasoned arguments in print is appalling. It may be that cold, hard logic doesn't sell magazines and newspapers very well.

Your forthright statement on nuclear disarmament will help a lot of people with their thinking, and we all need some help with our thinking on that issue.

You may well already be aware of an organization which I consider an excellent source of rational information on the subject, but just in case you aren't aware of it, I commend to you *The Defense Monitor* of The Center for Defense Information, directed by Admiral Gene La Rocque. I make it a point to take a few copies to every Mensa bash I attend, as it provokes a lot of good discussion. At least better than the customary arguing over dots and commas in the bylaws, or who is sleeping with whom.

Bill Harmon
El Cerrito, CA

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Thank you, but I fear we are in for a vast deluge of arguments in favor of Star Wars. When the government plans to spend a trillion dollars or so on such a thing, there will be a lot of people standing in line for their share and working out a lot of idealistic arguments to justify the open wallet they're holding.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac,

At last! At last! I too can write in to complain. I've subscribed for almost two years (after another three of newsstand buying) and, though I would read constant complaints in the letters column about individual stories or issues or the direction the magazine was taking, I was always delighted with each magazine and each story. I began to worry. What was I—some fool who would wolf down any pap you served up because I knew no better? Had I no standards, no discernment? This really began to bother me, since I am a writer and like to think I measure what I write and read against pretty high standards, which still seemed quite operative when I turned my attention elsewhere.

Finally, in the September 1985 issue, I encountered "A Gift From The GrayLanders." Aha! a story that others might love, but I disliked. Not poorly written—just not my cup of tea. And, right on its heels, "Buddies," which I might have welcomed in a mystery magazine. However, I felt distinctly cheated finding it in *IAsfm,* feeling it took the space that might have been occupied by another "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" or "Dinner In Audoghast." "The Day We Really Lost The War" didn't do much for me either way, and I began to think I was on a roll. Perhaps one of the last stories would so profoundly disgust me that I would be able to write a scornful letter demanding that you cancel my subscription at once for attempting to foist off such substandard work on someone so discriminating as me.

Of course, then you had to spoil it with "Shaping Memory," a good solid satisfying SF story. I should have known better. Finally, you pulled "Green Mars" out of your editorial hats, forcing me to live a vivid, exhilarating month on the highest peak of terraformed Mars. Really, I should think you would be ashamed!

Now, of course, I can't cancel. Three stories I didn't care for in almost five years—I'm afraid I'm hooked for life. And I want you to know that it's all your fault.

Linda L. Rodriguez
Kansas City, MO

I suppose it's a sign of unfairly-heightened expectations or over-success on our part that three stories you didn't care for in almost five years shook you and made you consider cancellation. Is it fair, really, to expect to like every *story when we must try to satisfy a wide readership with greatly varying likes and dislikes?*

—Isaac Asimov

Greetings:

Yesterday I finished the June 1985 issue of your 'zine. Although I seldom seem to have time for let-

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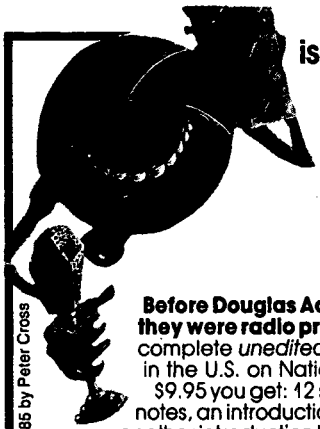

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ter-writing, I felt compelled to respond to Dr. Asimov's and Mr. Spinrad's comments on characterization in science fiction, in its myriad forms.

I don't think I'll fit too well into your poll, however, as I discovered upon reading both articles, that I require both idea and characterization for what I consider the best in the field. Some of my favorite SF includes *The Stars My Destination* and Gulley Foyle, *Heritage of Hastur* and Regis Hastur, *Dorsai* and Donal Graeme, *Dune* and Paul Atriedes, *Flowers For Algernon* and Charley, *Left Hand of Darkness* and Genly Ai, Fritz Leiber's Gray Mouser and Fafhred stories, McCaffrey's Pern stories of Lessa, F'lar, and Robinton, many Norton (I grew up with her characters and ideas of tolerance and growth), Tolkien's Fellowship, Zelazny's nine princes, and MacAvoy's black dragon. This list comes right off the top of my head with no digging into my library. Unlike many types of stories, SF can stand on idea alone, but the best includes both novel ideas and unforgettable people/beings.

I hope you have three places in your poll so those of us who cheer for both have a place. Good articles!

Sharron Albert
College, AK

Actually, I hip-hooray for both characterization and ideas, also. It's not that I expect anyone to favor either to the exclusion of the other. It's just a question as to whether if there's not room for both, one ought to give primacy to one or the other.

—Isaac Asimov

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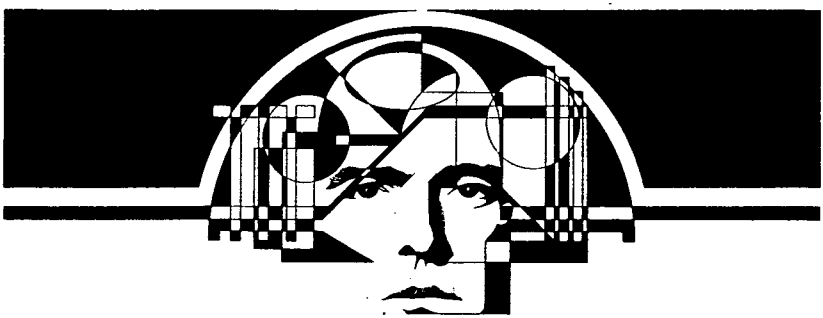
MARTIN GARDNER

ALICE IN BEELAND



There are no bees in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books unless you include the elephants in the first paragraph of the insect chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass*. At first Alice thought they were bees because she saw them in the distance using their trunks to extract honey from giant flowers. Nevertheless, there is a thriving colony of highly intelligent bees in Wonderland.

"How curious," said Alice as she watched two worker bees playing chess on a triangular board tesselated like a honeycomb. "On the other side of the mirror we play chess on squares."

"I'm aware of that, honey child," said the bee playing the black pieces. "But we find that square cells make a very dull game. Your rooks move only in four directions. Our rooks move in six."

"Mr. Dodgson showed me a marvelous puzzle on our chessboard," said Alice. "The problem is to put eight queens on the board so no queen attacks another."

"I know the puzzle well," said the bee playing white. "On our chessboard we have a similar problem of nonattacking rooks."

After the game ended, Herbert—the name of the bee who played white—used the honeycomb board to show Alice what the mathematicians of Beeland have discovered about the combinatorial problem of nonattacking bee-rooks. Figure 1 shows how a maximum number of bee-rooks can be placed on triangular boards with sides of 1 through 7 so

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that no rook attacks another. The largest number that can be put on the order-8 board, shown blank, is five. Can you find a way to do it before checking the answer on page 111?

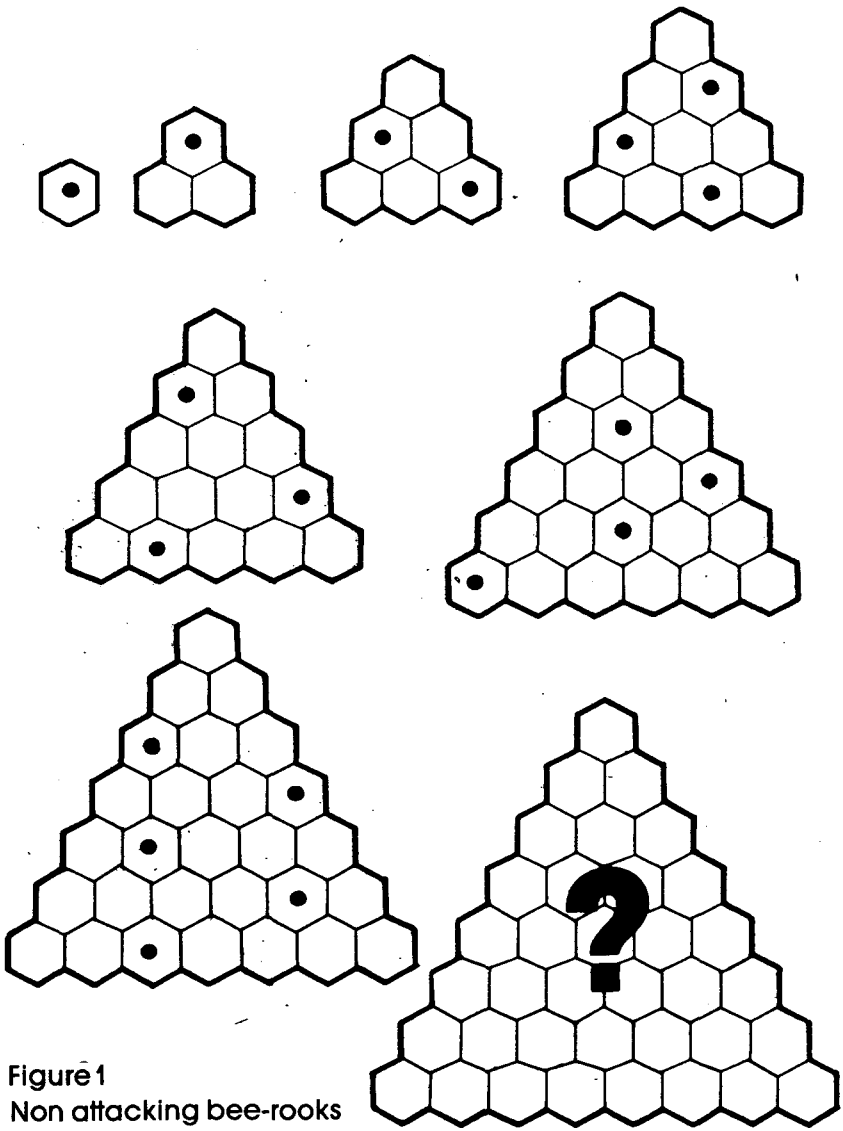

Figure 1
Non attacking bee-rooks

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

If you've seen the movie *Spartacus* seven times or enjoyed Heinlein's *Glory Road* primarily for the fight scenes, there's a new fantasy game of individual gladiatorial combat that may interest you. Called, appropriately enough, *Man to Man,* the game consists of a 60-page rule book with a set of 30 "Cardboard Heroes" cut-apart figures (available at your local store, or direct from Steve Jackson Games Inc., Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760).

Man to Man is intended as an introductory module in the forthcoming *GURPS* game (the *Generic Universal Role Playing System),* due to be released by Steve Jackson Games later this year. *GURPS* will cover all forms of role-playing, from fantasy to science fiction, from superhero to secret agent. *Man to Man* covers melee combat in the pre-gunpowder period and includes special rules for fantasy characters such as Elves, Reptile Men, and Orcs. After learning the basic and advanced combat rules in *Man to Man,* a player will be ready for the complete *GURPS* game, having already mastered the most difficult part (combat).

Even gamers who don't enjoy role-playing, and active role-players who are satisfied with the systems they are currently using should take a serious look at *Man to Man.* Although it's the first part of *GURPS,* it's also a fine stand-alone board game of gladiatorial-style combat. It can also be easily adapted to use with other role-playing games.

The basis of the game's design is the "reality check." Whenever a question arose concerning weight, distance, or speed, the game's developers settled it by actual field testing, often using "boffer" weapons (padded sticks in the shape of swords, maces, etc.) for simulated combat.

A second major design concern was organization. The table of contents provides an excellent overview and quick reference for each of the nine sections of rules. For instance, a glance at section 8, Special Combat Situations (which are usually the bane of gamemasters/referees) shows where to find the rules for jumping during combat, shoving things and knocking them over, falling, surprise attacks, dirty tricks, and other possibilities.

The rules are written in a clear, readable style, and are presented in a clever and effective format. The primary information is two columns wide while a third column

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Questar

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is used for sidebars to enhance the rules.

Each character in combat has four attributes: Strength (brawn); Dexterity (agility and coordination); Intelligence (brainpower, alertness, and adaptability); and Health (energy and vitality). You design a character using a point system. The number of points available is determined before play begins. Common street scum would have about 10 points while a Conan-type hero would have around 100 points. These points are used to "purchase" each of the four attributes, as well as various advantages (such as Ambidextrousness) and skills (such as Fast Draw). Additional points can be generated by making some skill levels below average, thereby "paying" negative amounts.

An example of a 100-point hero might be: Strength 9 (which is below average, so it costs −10 points); Dexterity 15 (60 points); Intelligence 10 (average, 0 points); and Health 13 (30 points); With the minus 10 points for below average Strength, this gives a net total expenditure of 80 points, leaving 20 points to "buy" skills. The advantage called Toughness, which subtracts from damage taken in combat, costs 10 points, so our hero "buys" that. The remaining 10 points are used to "purchase" weapons skills and are divided among four weapons: shortsword (4 points); crossbow (4); knife (1); and shield (1).

It's possible to improve attributes by earning Experience Points with which to "buy" higher levels of abilities; however, each new level costs double the amount of the preceding level. This prevents too many Conans from cluttering up the place.

In order to quickly create non-player characters to bash (lovingly referred to in the game as "cannon fodder"), a random generation system is also provided. For player characters (the characters you control), the character record sheet provides a nice touch, a featureless drawing of a fighter which you can personalize by adding appropriate clothing and weapons.

Each game turn represents one second of real time. Characters may perform only one action per turn, be it drawing a weapon, moving, attacking, etc. Characters receive their turn according to die rolls (the easy option) or according to speed (the realistic option). Speed is Health plus Dexterity values added together, divided by four.

Man to Man is highly detailed, but surprisingly easy to play. It works well even for battles among a large number of adversaries. Since many of the mechanics are similar to Steve Jackson's earlier role-playing design, *The Fantasy Trip* (now out of print), players familiar with that system will learn this one very quickly.

Because of its variety of possible gaming applications and easy-to-read style, *Man to Man* is highly recommended to fantasy/gladiatorial gamers. ●

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THE SOUL AS A NEW MACHINE

Yes, certainly it's messy, for a moment;
opening the skull there's always blood.
The operating room is no more sterile
for births or ailing kidneys—understood?

What can you lose? It's not like we're removing
something you need. We're adding something small
which people have yearned for, tried to find, mistrusted;
we cast the thing in circuitry. That's all.

Look: it's minute. It can't do any damage.
It sits there in your head and lets you view
the subtle bonds which bind you to the cosmos.
Millions have sought such visions. Haven't you?

And, quite apart from such aesthetic questions,
we've solved the nagging puzzle which has so
plagued thinkers since antiquity—the nature
of posthumous existence. Now you know.

After you die we'll take it out and give it
to someone else who would like to persevere.
There it is: safe and certain transmigration.
The contract is in triplicate. Sign here.

—Susan Palwick

art: Sheila Smith

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by Tanith Lee

INTO GOLD

art: Terry Lee

The author currently has twenty-five books in print. She is the winner of two World Fantasy Awards for Best Short Story and the August Derleth Award for her novel *Death's Master.* Ms. Lee last appeared in our November 1985 issue with "Blood-Mantle."

I

Up behind Danuvius, the forests are black, and so stiff with black pork, black bears, and black-grey wolves, a man alone will feel himself jostled. Here and there you come on a native village, pointed houses of thatch with carved wooden posts, and smoke thick enough to cut with your knife. All day the birds call, and at night the owls come out. There are other things of earth and darkness, too. One ceases to be surprised at what may be found in the forests, or what may stray from them on occasion.

One morning, a corn-king emerged, and pleased us all no end. There had been some trouble, and some of the stores had gone up in flames. The ovens were standing empty and cold. It can take a year to get goods overland from the River, and our northern harvest was months off.

The old fort, that had been the palace then for twelve years, was built on high ground. It looked out across a mile of country strategically cleared of trees, to the forest cloud and a dream of distant mountains. Draco had called me up to the roof-walk, where we stood watching these mountains glow and fade, and come and go. It promised to be a fine day, and I had been planning a good long hunt, to exercise the men and give the bread-less bellies solace. There is also a pine-nut meal they grind in the villages, accessible to barter. The loaves were not to everyone's taste, but we might have to come round to them. Since the armies pulled away, we had learned to improvise. I could scarcely remember the first days. The old men told you, everything, anyway, had been going down to chaos even then. Draco's father, holding on to a commander's power, assumed a

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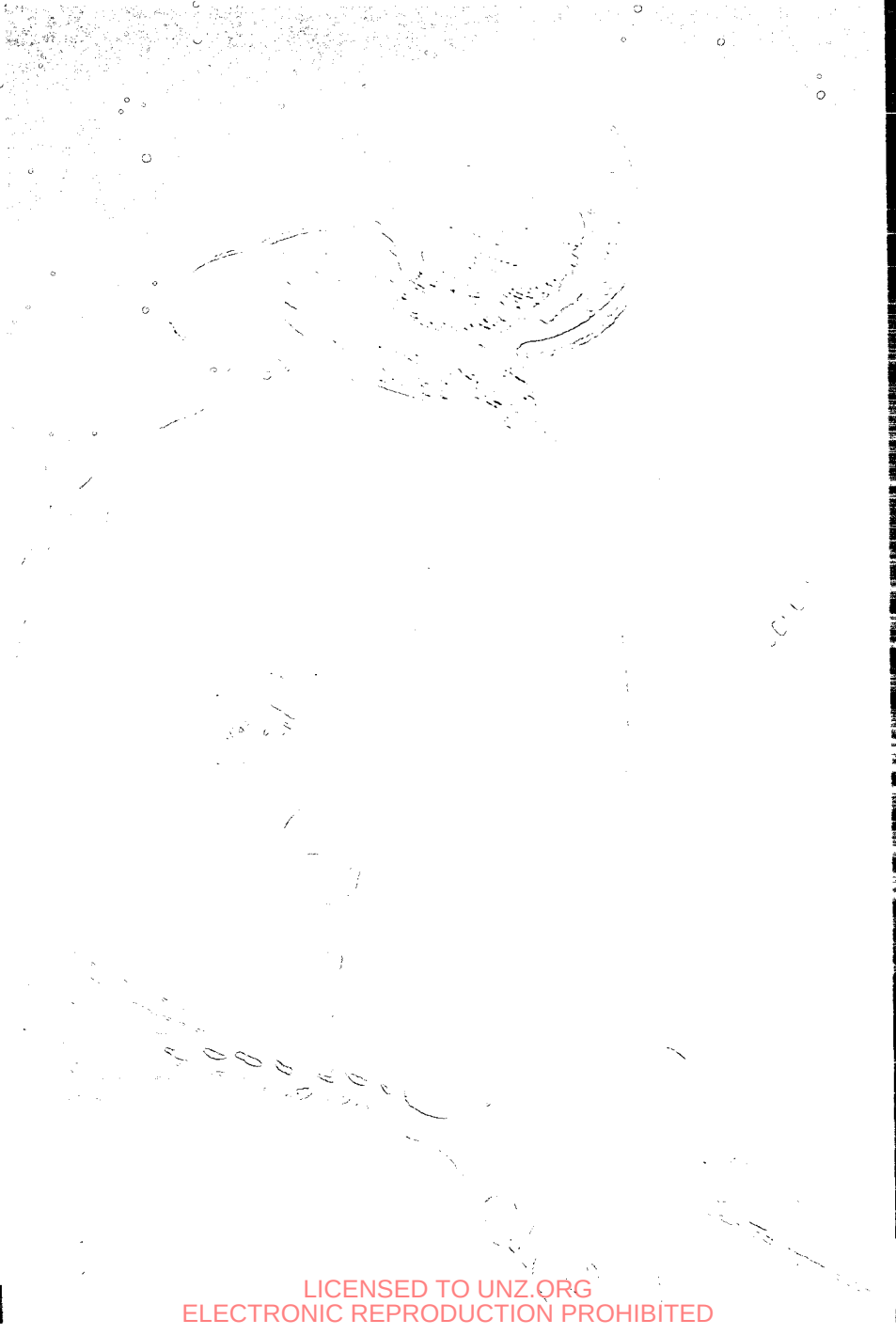

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prince's title which his orphaned warriors were glad enough to concede him. Discipline is its own ritual, and drug. As, lands and seas away from the center of the world caved in, soldier-fashion, they turned builders. They made the road to the fort, and soon began on the town, shoring it, for eternity, with strong walls. Next, they opened up the country, and got trade rights seen to that had gone by default for decades. There was plenty of skirmishing as well to keep their swords bright. When the Commander died of a wound got fighting the Blue-Hair Tribe, a terror in those days, not seen for years since, Draco became the Prince in the Palace. He was eighteen then, and I five days older. We had known each other nearly all our lives, learned books and horses, drilled, hunted together. Though he was born elsewhere, he barely took that in, coming to this life when he could only just walk. For myself, I am lucky, perhaps, I never saw the Mother of Cities, and so never hanker after her, or lament her downfall.

That day on the roof-walk, certainly, nothing was further from my mind. Then Draco said, "*There* is something."

His clear-water eyes saw detail quicker and more finely than mine. When I looked, to me still it was only a blur and fuss on the forest's edge, and the odd sparkling glint of things catching the early sun.

"Now, Skorous, do you suppose . . . ?" said Draco.

"Someone has heard of our misfortune, and considerably changed his route," I replied.

We had got news a week before of a grain-caravan, but too far west to be of use. Conversely, it seemed, the caravan had received news of our fire. "Up goes the price of bread," said Draco.

By now I was sorting it out, the long rigmarole of mules and baggage-wagons, horses and men. He traveled in some style. Truly, a corn-king, profiting always because he was worth his weight in gold amid the wilds of civilization. In Empire days, he would have weighed rather less.

We went down, and were in the square behind the east gate when the sentries brought him through. He left his people out on the parade before the gate, but one wagon had come up to the gateway, presumably his own, a huge conveyance, a regular traveling house, with six oxen in the shafts. Their straps were spangled with what I took for brass. On the side-leathers were pictures of grind-stones and grain done in purple and yellow. He himself rode a tall horse, also spangled. He had a slim, snaky look, an Eastern look, with black brows and fawn skin. His fingers and ears were remarkable for their gold. And suddenly I began to

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wonder about the spangles. He bowed to Draco, the War-Leader and Prince. Then, to be quite safe, to me.

"Greetings, Miller," I said.

He smiled at this coy honorific.

"Health and greetings, Captain. I think I am welcome?"

"My prince," I indicated Draco, "is always hospitable to wayfarers."

"Particularly to those with wares, in time of dearth."

"Which dearth is that?"

He put one golden finger to one golden ear-lobe.

"The trees whisper. This town of the Iron Shields has no bread."

Draco said mildly, "You should never listen to gossip."

I said, "If you've come out of your way, that would be a pity."

The Corn-King regarded me, not liking my arrogance—though I never saw the Mother of Cities, I have the blood—any more than I liked his slink and glitter.

As this went on, I gambling and he summing up the bluff, the tail of my eye caught another glimmering movement, from where his house wagon waited at the gate. I sensed some woman must be peering round the flap, the way the Eastern females do. The free girls of the town are prouder, even the wolf-girls of the brothel, and aristocrats use a veil only as a sunshade. Draco's own sisters, though decorous and well brought-up, can read and write, each can handle a light chariot, and will stand and look a man straight in the face. But I took very little notice of the fleeting apparition, except to decide it too had gold about it. I kept my sight on my quarry, and presently he smiled again and drooped his eyelids, so I knew he would not risk calling me, and we had won. "Perhaps," he said, "there might be a little consideration of the detour I, so foolishly, erroneously, made."

"We are always glad of fresh supplies. The fort is not insensible to its isolation. Rest assured."

"Too generous," he said. His eyes flared. But politely he added, "I have heard of your town. There is great culture here. You have a library, with scrolls from Hellas, and Semitic Byblos—I can read many tongues, and would like to ask permission of your lord to visit among his books."

I glanced at Draco, amused by the fellow's cheek, though all the East thinks itself a scholar. But Draco was staring at the wagon. Something worth a look, then, which I had missed.

"And we have excellent baths," I said to the Corn-King, letting him know in turn that the Empire's lost children think all the scholarly East to be also unwashed.

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* * *

By midday, the whole caravan had come in through the walls and arranged itself in the market-place, near the temple of Mars. The temple priests, some of whom had been serving with the Draconis Regiment when it arrived, old, old men, did not take to this influx. In spring and summer, traders were in and out the town like flies, and native men came to work in the forges and the tannery or with the horses, and built their muddy thatch huts behind the unfinished law-house—which huts winter rain always washed away again when their inhabitants were gone. To such events of passage the priests were accustomed. But this new show displeased them. The chief Salius came up to the fort, attended by his slaves, and argued a while with Draco. Heathens, said the priest, with strange rituals, and dirtiness, would offend the patron god of the town. Draco seemed preoccupied.

I had put off the hunting party, and now stayed to talk the Salius into a better humor. It would be a brief nuisance, and surely, they had been directed to us by the god himself, who did not want his war-like sons to go hungry? I assured the priest that, if the foreigners wanted to worship their own gods, they would have to be circumspect. Tolerance of every religious rag, as we knew, was unwise. They did not, I thought, worship Iusa. There would be no abominations. I then vowed a boar to Mars, if I could get one, and the dodderer tottered, pale and grim, away.

Meanwhile, the grain was being seen to. The heathen god-offenders had sacks and jars of it, and ready flour besides. It seemed a heavy chancy load with which to journey, goods that might spoil if at all delayed, or if the weather went against them. And all that jangling of gold beside. They fairly bled gold. I had been right in my second thought on the bridle-decorations, there were even nuggets and bells hung on the wagons, and gold flowers; and the oxen had gilded horns. For the men, they were ringed and buckled and roped and tied with it. It was a marvel.

When I stepped over to the camp near sunset, I was on the look-out for anything amiss. But they had picketed their animals couthly enough, and the dazzle-fringed, clink-bellied wagons stood quietly shadowing and gleaming in the westered light. Columns of spicy smoke rose, but only from their cooking. Boys dealt with that, and boys had drawn water from the well; neither I nor my men had seen any women.

Presently I was conducted to the Corn-King's wagon. He received me before it, where woven rugs, and cushions stitched with

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golden discs, were strewn on the ground. A tent of dark purple had been erected close by. With its gilt-tasseled sides all down, it was shut as a box. A disc or two more winked yellow from the folds. Beyond, the plastered colonnades, the stone Mars Temple, stood equally closed and eyeless, refusing to see.

The Miller and I exchanged courtesies. He asked me to sit, so I sat. I was curious.

"It is pleasant," he said, "to be within safe walls."

"Yes, you must be often in some danger," I answered.

He smiled, secretively now. "You mean our wealth? It is better to display than to hide. The thief kills, in his hurry, the man who conceals his gold. I have never been robbed. They think, Ah, this one shows all his riches. He must have some powerful demon to protect him."

"And is that so?"

"Of course," he said.

I glanced at the temple, and then back at him, meaningly. He said, "Your men drove a hard bargain for the grain and the flour. And I have been docile. I respect your gods, Captain. I respect all gods. That, too, is a protection."

Some drink came. I tasted it cautiously, for Easterners often eschew wine and concoct other disgusting muck. In the forests they ferment thorn berries, or the milk of their beasts, neither of which methods makes such a poor beverage, when you grow used to it. But of the Semites one hears all kinds of things. Still, the drink had a sweet hot sizzle that made me want more, so I swallowed some, then waited to see what else it would do to me.

"And your lord will allow me to enter his library?" said the Corn-King, after a host's proper pause.

"That may be possible," I said. I tried the drink again. "How do you manage without women?" I added, "You'll have seen the House of the Mother, with the she-wolf painted over the door? The girls there are fastidious and clever. If your men will spare the price, naturally."

The Corn-King looked at me, with his liquid man-snake's eyes, aware of all I said which had not been spoken.

"It is true," he said at last, "that we have no women with us."

"Excepting your own wagon."

"My daughter," he said.

I had known Draco, as I have said, almost all my life. He was for me what no other had ever been; I had followed his star gladly and without question, into scrapes, and battles, through very fire and steel. Very rarely would he impose on me some task I hated,

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loathed. When he did so it was done without design or malice, as a man sneezes. The bad times were generally to do with women. I had fought back to back with him, but I did not care to be his pander. Even so, I would not refuse. He had stood in the window that noon, looking at the black forest, and said in a dry low voice, carelessly apologetic, irrefutable, "He has a girl in that wagon. Get her for me." "Well, she may be his—" I started off. He cut me short. "Whatever she is. He sells things. He is accustomed to selling." "And if he won't?" I said. Then he looked at me, with his high-colored, translucent eyes. "Make him," he said, and next laughed, as if it were nothing at all, this choice mission. I had come out thinking glumly, she has witched him, put the Eye on him. But I had known him lust like this before. Nothing would do then but he must have. Women had never been that way for me. They were available, when one needed them. I like to this hour to see them here and there, *our* women, straight-limbed, graceful, clean. In the perilous seasons I would have died defending his sisters, as I would have died to defend him. That was that. It was a fact, the burning of our grain had come about through an old grievance, an idiot who kept score of something Draco had done half a year ago, about a native girl got on a raid.

I put down the golden cup, because the drink was going to my head. They had two ways, Easterners, with daughters. One was best left unspoken. The other kept them locked and bolted virgin. Mercurius bless the dice. Then, before I could say anything, the Miller put my mind at rest.

"My daughter," he said, "is very accomplished. She is also very beautiful, but I speak now of the beauty of learning and art."

"Indeed. Indeed."

The sun was slipping over behind the walls. The far mountains were steeped in dyes. This glamour shone behind the Corn-King's head, gold in the sky for him, too. And he said, "Amongst other matters, she has studied the lore of Khemia—Old Aegyptus, you will understand."

"Ah, yes?"

"Now I will confide in you," he said. His tongue flickered on his lips. Was it forked? The damnable drink had fuddled me after all, that, and a shameful relief. "The practice of the Al-Khemia contains every science and sorcery. She can read the stars, she can heal the hurts of man. But best of all, my dear Captain, my daughter has learned the third great secret of the Tri-Magae."

"Oh, yes, indeed?"

"She can," he said, "change all manner of materials into gold."

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II

"Sometimes, Skorous," Draco said, "you are a fool."

"Sometimes I am not alone in that."

Draco shrugged. He had never feared honest speaking. He never asked more of a title than his own name. But those two items were, in themselves, significant. He was what he was, a law above the law. The heart-legend of the City was down, and he a prince in a forest that ran all ways for ever.

"What do you think then she will do to me? Turn me into metal, too?"

We spoke in Greek, which tended to be the palace mode for private chat. It was fading out of use in the town.

"I don't believe in that kind of sorcery," I said.

"Well, he has offered to have her show us. Come along."

"It will be a trick."

"All the nicer. Perhaps he will find someone for you, too."

"I shall attend you," I said, "because I trust none of them. And fifteen of my men around the wagon."

"I must remember not to groan," he said, "or they'll be splitting the leather and tumbling in on us with swords."

"Draco," I said, "I'm asking myself why he boasted that she had the skill?"

"All that gold: They didn't steal it or cheat for it. A witch *made* it for them."

"I have heard of the Al-Khemian arts."

"Oh yes," he said. "The devotees make gold, they predict the future, they raise the dead. She might be useful. Perhaps I should marry her. Wait till you see her," he said. "I suppose it was all pre-arranged. He will want paying again."

When we reached the camp, it was midnight. Our torches and theirs opened the dark, and the flame outside the Mars Temple burned faint. There were stars in the sky, no moon.

We had gone to them at their request, since the magery was intrinsic, required utensils, and was not to be moved to the fort without much effort. We arrived like a bridal procession. The show was not after all to be in the wagon, but the tent. The other Easterners had buried themselves from view. I gave the men their orders and stood them conspicuously about. Then a slave lifted the tent's purple drapery a chink and squinted up at us. Draco beckoned me after him, no one demurred. We both went into the pavilion.

To do that was to enter the East head-on. Expensive gums were

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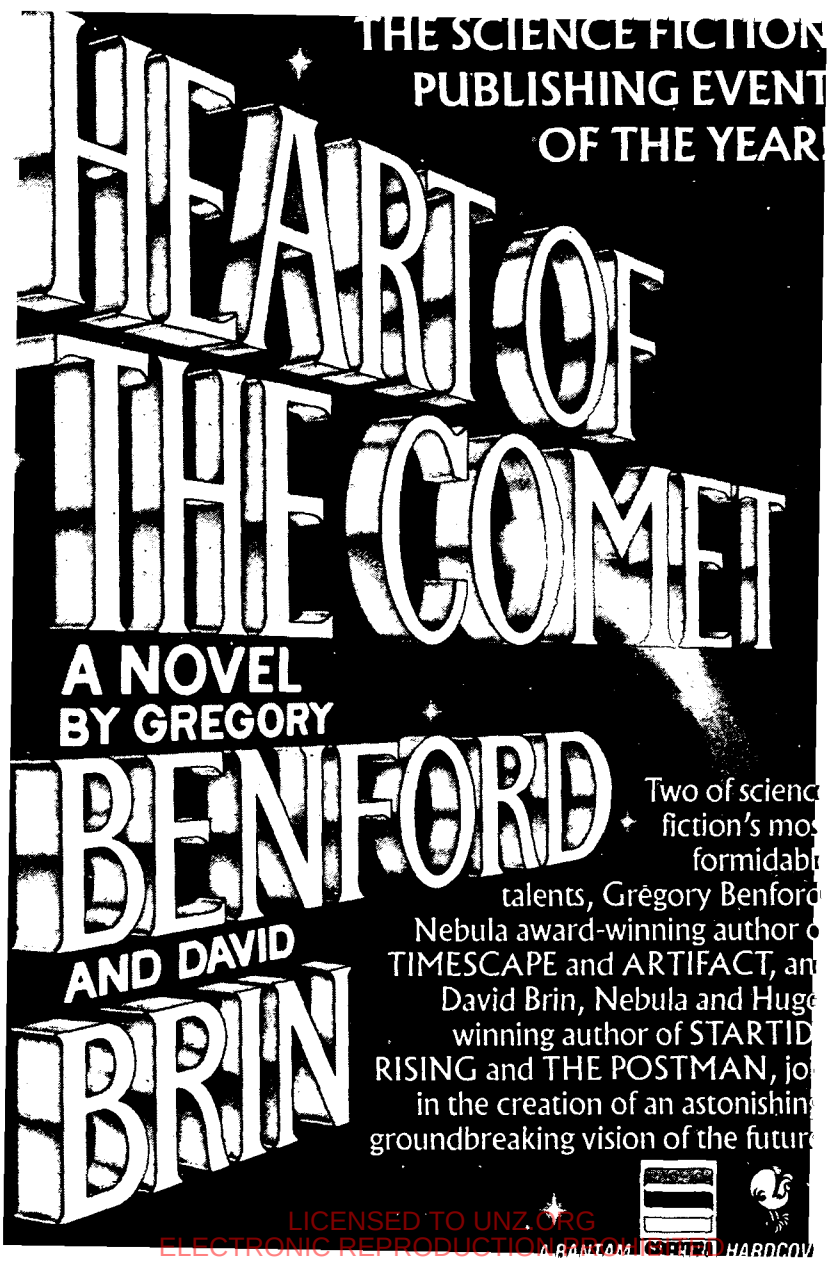

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burning with a dark hot perfume that put me in mind of the wine I had had earlier. The incense-burners were gold, tripods on leopards' feet, with swags of golden ivy. The floor was carpeted soft, like the pelt of some beast, and beast-skins were hung about—things I had not seen before, some of them, maned and spotted, striped and scaled, and some with heads and jewelry eyes and the teeth and claws gilded. Despite all the clutter of things, of polished mirrors and casks and chests, cushions and dead animals, and scent, there was a feeling of great space within that tent. The ceiling of it stretched taut and high, and three golden wheels depended, with oil-lights in little golden boats. The wheels turned idly now this way, now that, in a wind that came from nowhere and went to nowhere, a demon wind out of a desert. Across the space, wide as night, was an opaque dividing curtain, and on the curtain, a long parchment. It was figured with another mass of images, as if nothing in the place should be spare. A tree went up, with two birds at the roots, a white bird with a raven-black head, a soot-black bird with the head of an ape. A snake twined the tree too, round and round, and ended looking out of the lower branches where yellow fruit hung. The snake had the face of a maiden, and flowing hair. Above sat three figures, judges of the dead from Aegyptus, I would have thought, if I had thought about them, with a balance, and wands. The sun and the moon stood over the tree.

I put my hand to the hilt of my sword, and waited. Draco had seated himself on the cushions. A golden jug was to hand, and a cup. He reached forward, poured the liquor and made to take it, before—reluctantly—I snatched the vessel. "Let me, first. Are you mad?"

He reclined, not interested as I tasted for him, then let him have the cup again.

Then the curtain parted down the middle and the parchment with it, directly through the serpent-tree. I had expected the Miller, but instead what entered was a black dog with a collar of gold. It had a wolf's shape, but more slender, and with a pointed muzzle and high carven pointed ears. Its eyes were also black. It stood calmly, like a steward, regarding us, then stepped aside and lay down, its head still raised to watch. And next the woman Draco wanted came in.

To me, she looked nothing in particular. She was pleasantly made, slim, but rounded, her bare arms and feet the color of amber. Over her head, to her breast, covering her hair and face like a dusky smoke, was a veil, but it was transparent enough

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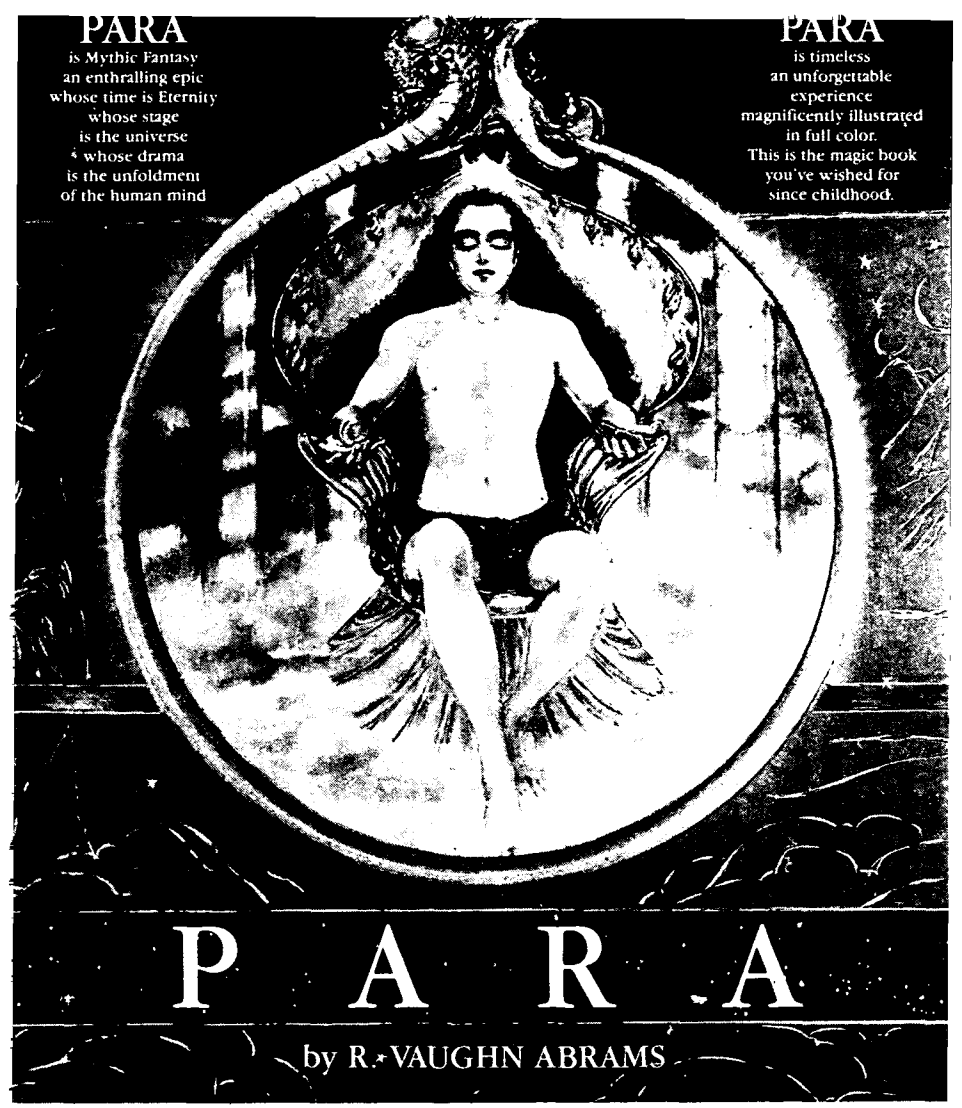

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you saw through it to black locks and black aloe eyes, and a full tawny mouth. There was only a touch of gold on her, a rolled torque of soft metal at her throat, and one ring on her right hand. I was puzzled as to what had made her glimmer at the edge of my sight before, but perhaps she had dressed differently then, to make herself plain.

She bowed Eastern-wise to Draco, then to me. Then, in the purest Greek I ever heard, she addressed us.

"Lords, while I am at work, I must ask that you will please be still, or else you will disturb the currents of the act and so impair it. Be seated," she said to me, as if I had only stood till then from courtesy. Her eyes were very black, black as the eyes of the jackal-dog, blacker than the night. Then she blinked, and her eyes flashed. The lids were painted with gold. And I found I had sat down.

What followed I instantly took for an hallucination, induced by the incense, and by other means less perceptible. That is not to say I did not think she was a witch. There was something of power to her I never met before. It pounded from her, like heat, or an aroma. It did not make her beautiful for me, but it held me quiet, though I swear never once did I lose my grip either on my senses or my sword.

First, and quite swiftly, I had the impression the whole tent blew upward, and we were in the open in fact, under a sky of a million stars that blazed and crackled like diamonds. Even so, the golden wheels stayed put, up in the sky now, and they spun, faster and faster, until each was a solid golden O of fire, three spinning suns in the heaven of midnight.

(I remember I thought flatly, We have been spelled. So what now? But in its own way, my stoicism was also suspect. My thoughts in any case flagged after that.)

There was a smell of lions, or of a land that had them. Do not ask me how I know, I never smelled or saw them, or such a spot. And there before us all stood a slanting wall of brick, at once much larger than I saw it, and smaller than it was. It seemed even so to lean into the sky. The woman raised her arms. She was apparent now as if rinsed all over by gilt, and one of the great stars seemed to sear on her forehead.

Forms began to come and go, on the lion-wind. If I knew then what they were, I forgot it later. Perhaps they were animals, like the skins in the tent, though some had wings.

She spoke to them. She did not use Greek any more. It was the

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language of Khem, presumably, or we were intended to believe so. A liquid tongue, an Eastern tongue, no doubt.

Then there were other visions. The ribbed stems of flowers, broader than ten men around, wide petals pressed to the ether. A rainbow of mist that arched over, and touched the earth with its feet and its brow. And other mirages, many of which resembled effigies I had seen of the gods, but they walked.

The night began to close upon us slowly, narrowing and coming down. The stars still raged overhead and the gold wheels whirled, but some sense of enclosure had returned. As for the sloped angle of brick it had huddled down into a sort of oven, and into this the woman was placing, with extreme care—of all things—long sceptres of corn, all brown and dry and withered, blighted to straw by some harvest like a curse.

I heard her whisper then. I could not hear what.

Behind her, dim as shadows, I saw other women, who sat weaving, or who toiled at the grind-stone, and one who shook a rattle upon which rings of gold sang out. Then the vision of these women was eclipsed. Something stood there, between the night and the Eastern witch. Tall as the roof, or tall as the sky, bird-headed maybe, with two of the stars for eyes. When I looked at this, this ultimate apparition, my blood froze and I could have howled out loud. It was not common fear, but terror, such as the worst reality has never brought me, though sometimes subtle nightmares do.

Then there was a lightning, down the night. When it passed, we were enclosed in the tent, the huge night of the tent, and the brick oven burned before us, with a thin harsh fume coming from the aperture in its top.

"Sweet is truth," said the witch, in a wild and passionate voice, all music, like the notes of the gold rings on the rattle. "O Lord of the Word. The Word is, and the Word makes all things to be."

Then the oven cracked into two pieces, it simply fell away from itself, and there on a bank of red charcoal, which died to clinker even as I gazed at it, lay a sheaf of golden corn. *Golden* corn, smiths' work. It was pure and sound and rang like a bell when presently I went to it and struck it and flung it away.

The tent had positively resettled all around us. It was there. I felt queasy and stupid, but I was in my body and had my bearings again, the sword-hilt firm to my palm, though it was oddly hot to the touch, and my forehead burned, sweatless, as if I too had been seethed in a fire. I had picked up the goldwork without asking her anything. She did not prevent me, nor when I slung it off.

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When I looked up from that, she was kneeling by the curtain, where the black dog had been and was no more. Her eyes were downcast under her veil. I noted the torque was gone from her neck and the ring from her finger. Had she somehow managed her trick that way, melting gold on to the stalks of mummified corn—No, lunacy. Why nag at it? It was *all* a deception.

But Draco lay looking at her now, burned up by another fever. It was her personal gold he wanted.

"Out, Skorous," he said to me. "Out, now." Slurred and sure.

So I said to her, through my blunted lips and woollen tongue, "Listen carefully, girl. The witchery ends now. You know what he wants, and how to see to that, I suppose. Scratch him with your littlest nail, and you die."

Then, without getting to her feet, she looked up at me, only the second time. She spoke in Greek, as at the start. In the morning, when I was better able to think, I reckoned I had imagined what she said. It had seemed to be: "He is safe, for I desire him. It is my choice. If it were not my choice and my desire, where might you hide yourselves, and live?"

We kept watch round the tent, in the Easterners' camp, in the market-place, until the ashes of the dawn. There was not a sound from anywhere, save the regular quiet passaging of sentries on the walls, and the cool black forest wind that turned grey near sunrise.

At sunup, the usual activity of any town began. The camp stirred and let its boys out quickly to the well to avoid the town's women. Some of the caravaners even chose to stroll across to the public lavatories, though they had avoided the bathhouse.

An embarrassment came over me, that we should be standing there, in the foreigners' hive, to guard our prince through his night of lust. I looked sharply, to see how the men were taking it, but they had held together well. Presently Draco emerged. He appeared flushed and tumbled, very nearly shy, like some girl just out of a love-bed.

We went back to the fort in fair order, where he took me aside, thanked me, and sent me away again.

Bathed and shaved, and my fast broken, I began to feel more sanguine. It was over and done with. I would go down to the temple of Father Jupiter and give him something—why, I was not exactly sure. Then get my boar for Mars. The fresh-baked bread I had just eaten was tasty, and maybe worth all the worry.

Later, I heard the Miller had taken himself to our library and

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been let in. I gave orders he was to be searched on leaving. Draco's grandfather had started the collection of manuscripts, there were even scrolls said to have been rescued from Alexandrea. One could not be too wary.

In the evening, Draco called me up to his writing-room.

"Tomorrow," he said, "the Easterners will be leaving us."

"That's good news," I said.

"I thought it would please you. Zafra, however, is to remain. I'm taking her into my household."

"Zafra," I said.

"Well, they call her that. For the yellow-gold. Perhaps not her name. That might have been *Nefra*—Beautiful . . ."

"Well," I said, "if you want."

"Well," he said, "I never knew you before to be jealous of one of my women."

I said nothing, though the blood knocked about in my head. I had noted before, he had a woman's tongue himself when he was put out. He was a spoiled brat as a child, I have to admit, but a mother's early death, and the life of a forest fortess, pared most of it from him.

"The Corn-King is not her father," he said now. "She told me. But he's stood by her as that for some years. I shall send him something, in recompense."

He waited for my comment that I was amazed nothing had been asked for. He waited to see how I would jump. I wondered if he had paced about here, planning how he would put it to me. Not that he was required to. Now he said: "We gain, Skorous, a healer and deviner. Not just my pleasure at night."

"Your pleasure at night is your own affair. There are plenty of girls about, I would have thought, to keep you content. As for anything else she can or cannot do, all three temples, particularly the Women's Temple, will be up in arms. The Salius yesterday was only a sample. Do you think they are going to let some yellow-skinned harlot devine for you? Do you think that men who get hurt in a fight will want her near them?"

"You would not, plainly."

"No, I would not. As for the witchcraft, we were drugged and made monkeys of. An evening's fun is one thing."

"Yes, Skorous," he said. "Thanks for your opinion. Don't sulk too long. I shall miss your company."

An hour later, he sent, so I was informed, two of the scrolls from the library to the Corn-King in his wagon. They were two of the best, Greek, one transcribed by the hand, it was said, of a

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very great king. They went in a silver box, with jewel inlay. Gold would have been tactless, under the circumstances.

Next day she was in the palace. She had rooms on the women's side. It had been the apartment of Draco's elder sister, before her marriage. He treated this one as nothing less than a relative from the first. When he was at leisure, on those occasions when the wives and women of his officers dined with them, there was she with him. When he hunted, she went with him, too, not to have any sport, but as a companion, in a litter between two horses that made each hunt into a farce from its onset. She was in his bed each night, for he did not go to her, her place was solely hers: The couch his father had shared only with his mother. And when he wanted advice, it was she who gave it to him. He called on his soldiers and his priests afterwards. Though he always did so call, nobody lost face. He was wise and canny, she must have told him how to be at long last. And the charm he had always had. He even consulted me, and made much of me before everyone, because, very sensibly he realized, unless he meant to replace me, it would be foolish to let the men see I no longer counted a feather's weight with him. Besides, I might get notions of rebellion. I had my own following, my own men who would die for me if they thought me wronged. Probably that angered me more than the rest, that he might have the idea I would forego my duty and loyalty, forget my honor, and try to pull him down. I could no more do that than put out one of my own eyes.

Since we lost our homeland, since we lost, more importantly, the spine of the Empire, there had been a disparity, a separation of men. Now I saw it, in those bitter golden moments after she came among us. He had been born in the Mother of Cities, but she had slipped from his skin like water. He was a new being, a creature of the world, that might be anything, of any country. But, never having seen the roots of me, they yet had me fast. I was of the old order. I would stand until the fire had me, rather than tarnish my name, and my heart.

Gradually, the fort and town began to fill with gold. It was very nearly a silly thing. But we grew lovely and we shone. The temples did not hate her, as I had predicted. No, for she brought them glittering vessels, and laved the gods' feet with rare offerings, and the sweet spice also of her gift burned before Mars, and the Father, and the Mother, so every holy place smelled like Aegyptus, or Judea, or the brothels of Babylon for all I knew.

She came to walk in the streets with just one of the slaves at

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IN OTHER WORLDS

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her heels, bold, the way our ladies did, and though she never left off her veil, she dressed in the stola and the palla, all clasped and cinched with the tiniest amounts of gold, while gold flooded everywhere else, and everyone looked forward to the summer heartily, for the trading. The harvest would be wondrous too. Already there were signs of astounding fruition. And in the forest, not a hint of any restless tribe, or any ill wish.

They called her by the name *Zafra*. They did not once call her 'Easterner.' One day, I saw three pregnant women at the gate, waiting for Zafra to come out and touch them. She was lucky. Even the soldiers had taken no offense. The old Salius had asked her for a balm for his rheumatism. It seemed the balm had worked.

Only I, then, hated her. I tried to let it go. I tried to remember she was only a woman, and, if a sorceress, did us good. I tried to see her as voluptuous and enticing, or as homely and harmless. But all I saw was some shuttered-up, close, fermenting thing, like mummy-dusts reviving in a tomb, or the lion-scent, and the tall shadow that had stood between her and the night, bird-headed, the Lord of the Word that made all things, or unmade them. What was she, under her disguise? Draco could not see it. Like the black dog she had kept, which walked by her on a leash, well-mannered and gentle, and which would probably tear out the throat of anyone who came at her with mischief on his mind—Under her honeyed wrappings, was it a doll of straw or gold, or a viper?

Eventually, Draco married her. That was no surprise. He did it in the proper style, with sacrifices to the Father, and all the forms, and a feast that filled the town. I saw her in colors then, that once, the saffron dress, the Flammeus, the fire-veil of the bride, and her face bare, and painted up like a lady's, pale, with rosy cheeks and lips. But it was still herself, still the Eastern Witch.

And dully that day, as in the tent that night, I thought, So what now?

III

In the late summer, I picked up some talk, among the servants in the palace. I was by the well-court, in the peach arbor, where I had paused to look at the peaches. They did not always come, but this year we had had one crop already, and now the second was blooming. As I stood there in the shade, sampling the fruit, a pair of the kitchen men met below by the well, and stayed to

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gossip in their argot. At first I paid no heed, then it came to me what they were saying, and I listened with all my ears.

When one went off, leaving the other, old Ursus, to fill his dipper, I came down the stair and greeted him. He started, and looked at me furtively.

"Yes, I heard you," I said. "But tell me, now."

I had always put a mask on, concerning the witch, with everyone but Draco, and afterwards with him too. I let it be seen I thought her nothing much, but if she was his choice, I would serve her. I was careful never to speak slightingly of her to any—since it would reflect on his honor—even to men I trusted, even in wine. Since he had married her, she had got my duty, too, unless it came to vie with my duty to him.

But Ursus had the servant's way, the slave's way, of holding back bad news for fear it should turn on him. I had to repeat a phrase or two of his own before he would come clean.

It seemed that some of the women had become aware that Zafra, a sorceress of great power, could summon to her, having its name, a mighty demon. Now she did not sleep every night with Draco, but in her own apartments, sometimes things had been glimpsed, or heard—

"Well, Ursus," I said, "you did right to tell me. But it's a lot of silly women's talk. Come, you're not going to give it credit?"

"The flames burn flat on the lamps, and change color," he mumbled. "And the curtain rattled, but no one there. And Eunike says she felt some form brush by her in the corridor—"

"That is enough," I said. "Women will always fancy something is happening, to give themselves importance. You well know that. Then there's hysteria and they can believe and say anything. We are aware she has arts, and the science of Aegyptus. But demons are another matter."

I further admonished him and sent him off. I stood by the well, pondering. Rattled curtains, secretive forms—it crossed my thoughts she might have taken a lover, but it did not seem in keeping with her shrewdness. I do not really believe in such beasts as demons, except what the brain can bring forth. Then again, her brain might be capable of many things.

It turned out I attended Draco that evening, something to do with one of the villages that traded with us, something he still trusted me to understand. I asked myself if I should tell him about the gossip. Frankly, when I had found out—the way you always can—that he lay with her less frequently, I had had a sort of hope, but there was a qualm, too, and when the trade matter was dealt

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with, he stayed me over the wine, and he said: "You may be wondering about it, Skorous. If so, yes. I'm to be given a child."

I knew better now than to scowl. I drank a toast, and suggested he might be happy to have got a boy on her.

"She says it will be a son."

"Then of course, it will be a son."

And, I thought, it may have her dark-yellow looks. It may be a magus too. And it will be your heir, Draco. My future Prince, and the master of the town. I wanted to hurl the wine cup through the wall, but I held my hand and my tongue, and after he had gone on a while trying to coax me to thrill at the joy of life, I excused myself and went away.

It was bound to come. It was another crack in the stones. It was the way of destiny, and of change. I wanted not to feel I must fight against it, or desire to send her poison, to kill her or abort her, or tear it, her womb's fruit, when born, in pieces.

For a long while I sat on my sleeping-couch and allowed my fury to sink down, to grow heavy and leaden, resigned, defeated.

When I was sure of that defeat, I lay flat and slept.

In sleep, I followed a demon along the corridor in the women's quarters, and saw it melt through her door. It was tall, long-legged, with the head of a bird, or perhaps of a dog. A wind blew, lion-tanged. I was under a tree hung thick with peaches, and a snake looked down from it with a girl's face framed by a flaming bridal-veil. Then there was a spinning fiery wheel, and golden corn flew off clashing from it. And next I saw a glowing oven, and on the red charcoal lay a child of gold, burning and gleaming and asleep.

When I woke with a jump it was the middle of the night, and someone had arrived, and the slave was telling me so.

At first I took it for a joke. Then, became serious. Zafra, Draco's wife, an hour past midnight, had sent for me to attend her in her rooms. Naturally I suspected everything. She knew me for her adversary: She would lead me in, then say I had set on her to rape or somehow else abuse her. On the other hand, I must obey and go to her, not only for duty, now, but from sheer aggravation and raw curiosity. Though I had always told myself I misheard her words as I left her with him the first time, I had never forgotten them. Since then, beyond an infrequent politeness, we had not spoken.

I dressed as formally as I could, got two of my men, and went across to the women's side. The sentries along the route were my

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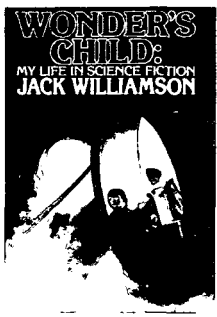

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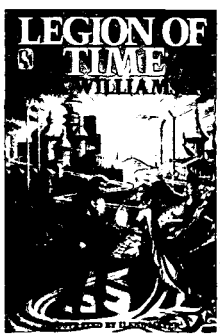

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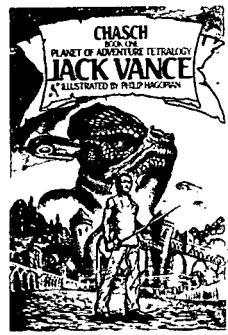

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fellows too, but I made sure they learned I had been specifically summoned. Rather to my astonishment, they knew it already.

My men went with me right to her chamber door, with orders to keep alert there. Perhaps they would grin, asking each other if I was nervous. I was.

When I got into the room, I thought it was empty. Her women had been sent away. One brazier burned, near the entry, but I was used by now to the perfume of those aromatics. It was a night of full moon, and the blank light lay in a whole pane across the mosaic, coloring it faintly, but in the wrong, nocturnal, colors. The bed, narrow, low, and chaste, stood on one wall, and her tiring table near it. Through the window under the moon, rested the tops of the forest, so black it made the indigo sky pale.

Then a red-golden light blushed out and I saw her, lighting the lamps on their stand from a taper. I could almost swear she had not been there a second before, but she could stay motionless a long while, and with her dark robe and hair, and all her other darkness, she was a natural thing for shadows.

"Captain," she said. (She never used my name, she must know I did not want it; a sorceress, she was well aware of the power of naming.) "There is no plot against you."

"That's good to know," I said, keeping my distance, glad of my sword, and of every visible insignia of who and what I was.

"You have been very honorable in the matter of me," she said. "You have done nothing against me, either openly or in secret, though you hated me from the beginning. I know what this has cost you. Do not spurn my gratitude solely because it is mine."

"Domina," I said (neither would I use her name, though the rest did in the manner of the town), "you're his. He has made you his wife. And—" I stopped.

"And the vessel of his child. Ah, do you think he did that alone?" She saw me stare with thoughts of demons, and she said, "He and I, Captain. He, and I."

"Then I serve you," I said. I added, and though I did not want to give her the satisfaction I could not keep back a tone of irony, "you have nothing to be anxious at where I am concerned."

We were speaking in Greek, hers clear as water in that voice of hers which I had to own was very beautiful.

"I remain," she said, "anxious."

"Then I can't help you, Domina." There was a silence. She stood looking at me, through the veil I had only once seen dispensed with in exchange for a veil of paint. I wondered where the dog had gone, that had her match in eyes. I said, "But I would warn

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you. If you practice your business in here, there's begun to be some funny talk."

"They see a demon, do they?" she said.

All at once the hair rose up on my neck and scalp.

As if she read my mind, she said:

"I have not pronounced any name. Do not be afraid."

"The slaves are becoming afraid."

"No," she said. "They have always talked of me but they have never been afraid of me. None of them. Draco does not fear me, do you think? And the priests do not. Or the women and girls. Or the children, or the old men. Or the slaves. Or your soldiers. None of them fear me or what I am or what I do, the gold with which I fill the temples, or the golden harvests, or the healing I perform. None of them fear it. But you, Captain, you do fear, and you read your fear again and again in every glance, in every word they utter. But it is yours, not theirs."

I looked away from her, up to the ceiling from which the patterns had faded years before.

"Perhaps," I said, "I am not blind."

Then she sighed. As I listened to it, I thought of her, just for an instant, as a forlorn girl alone with strangers in a foreign land.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It is true," she said, "you see more than most. But not your own error."

"Then that is how it is." My temper had risen and I must rein it.

"You will not," she said quietly, "be a friend to me."

"I cannot, and will not, be a friend to you. Neither am I your enemy, while you keep faith with him."

"But one scratch on my littlest nail," she said. Her musical voice was nearly playful.

"Only one," I said.

"Then I regret waking you, Captain;" she said. "Health and slumber for your night."

As I was going back along the corridor, I confronted the black jackal-dog. It padded slowly towards me and I shivered, but one of the men stooped to rub its ears. It suffered him, and passed on, shadow to shadow, night to ebony night.

Summer went to winter, and soon enough the snows came. The trading and the harvests had shored us high against the cruelest weather, we could sit in our towers and be fat, and watch the wolves howl through the white forests. They came to the very

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gates that year. There were some odd stories, that wolf-packs had been fed of our bounty, things left for them, to tide them over. Our own she-wolves were supposed to have started it, the whore-house girls. But when I mentioned the tale to one of them, she flared out laughing.

I recall that snow with an exaggerated brilliance, the way you sometimes do with time that precedes an illness, or a deciding battle. Albino mornings with the edge of a broken vase, the smoke rising from hearths and temples, or steaming with the blood along the snow from the sacrifices of Year's Turn. The Wolf Feast with the races, and later the ivies and vines cut for the Mad Feast, and the old dark wine got out, the torches, and a girl I had in a shed full of hay and pigs; and the spate of weddings that come after, very sensibly. The last snow twilights were thick as soup with blueness. Then spring, and the forest surging up from its slough, the first proper hunting, with the smell of sap and crushed freshness spraying out as if one waded in a river.

Draco's child was born one spring sunset, coming forth in the bloody golden light, crying its first cry to the evening star. It was a boy, as she had said.

I had kept even my thoughts off from her after that interview in her chamber. My feelings had been confused and displeasing. It seemed to me she had in some way tried to outwit me, throw me down. Then I had felt truly angry, and later, oddly shamed. I avoided, where I could, all places where I might have to see her. Then she was seen less, being big with the child.

After the successful birth all the usual things were done. In my turn, I beheld the boy. He was straight and flawlessly formed, with black hair, but a fair skin; he had Draco's eyes from the very start. So little of the mother. Had she contrived it, by some other witch's art, knowing that when at length we had to cleave to him, it would be Draco's line we wished to see? No scratch of a nail, there, none.

Nor had there been any more chat of demons. Or they made sure I never intercepted it.

I said to myself, She is a matron now, she will wear to our ways. She has borne him a strong boy.

But it was no use at all.

She was herself, and the baby was half of her.

They have a name now for her demon, her genius in the shadowlands of witchcraft. A scrambled name that does no harm. They call it, in the town's argot: *Rhamthibiscan.*

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From America's #1 Financial Adviser

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We claim so many of the Greek traditions; they know of Rhadamanthys from the Greek. A judge of the dead, he is connectable to Thot of Aegyptus, the Thrice-Mighty Thrice-Mage of the Al-Khemian Art. And because Thot the Ibis-Headed and Anpu the Jackal became mingled in it, along with Hermercurius, Prince of Thieves and Whores—who is too the guide of lost souls—an ibis and a dog were added to the brief itinerary. Rhadamanthys-Ibis-Canis. The full name, even, has no power. It is a muddle, and a lie, and the invocation says: *Sweet is Truth.* Was it, though, ever sensible to claim to know what truth might be?

IV

"They know of her, and have sent begging for her. She's a healer and they're sick. It's not unreasonable. She isn't afraid. I have seen her close an open wound by passing her hands above it. Yes, Skorous, perhaps she only made me see it, and the priests to see it, and the wounded man. But he recovered, as you remember. So I trust her to be able to cure these people and make them love us even better. She herself is immune to illness. Yes, Skorous, she only thinks she is. However, thinking so has apparently worked wonders. She was never once out of sorts with the child. The midwives were amazed—or not amazed, maybe—that she seemed to have no pain during the birth. Though they told me she wept when the child was put into her arms. Well, so did I." Draco frowned. He said, "So we'll let her do it, don't you agree, let her go to them and heal them. We may yet be able to open this country, make something of it, one day. Anything that is useful in winning them."

"She will be taking the child with her?"

"Of course. He's not weaned yet, and she won't let another woman nurse him."

"Through the forests. It's three days ride away, this village. And then we hardly know the details of the sickness. If your son—"

"He will be with his mother. She has never done a foolish thing."

"You let this bitch govern you. Very well. But don't risk the life of your heir, since your heir is what you have made him, this half-breed brat—"

I choked off the surge in horror. I had betrayed myself. It seemed to me instantly that I had been made to do it. *She* had made me.

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All the stored rage and impotent distrust, all the bitter frustrated *guile*—gone for nothing in a couple of sentences.

But Draco only shrugged, and smiled. He had learned to contain himself these past months. Her invaluable aid, no doubt, her rotten honey.

He said, "She has requested that, though I send a troop with her to guard her in our friendly woods, you, Skorous, do not go with them."

"I see."

"The reason which she gave was that, although there is no danger in the region at present, your love and spotless commitment to my well-being preclude you should be taken from my side." He put the smile away and said, "But possibly, too, she wishes to avoid your close company for so long, knowing as she must do you can barely keep your fingers from her throat. Did you know, Skorous," he said, and now it was the old Draco, I seemed somehow to have hauled him back, "that the first several months, I had her food always tasted. I thought you would try to see to her. I was so very astounded you never did. Or did you have some other, more clever plan, that failed?"

I swallowed the bile that had come into my mouth. I said, "You forget, Sir, if I quit you I have no other battalion to go to. The Mother of Cities is dead. If I leave your warriors, I am nothing. I am one of the scores who blow about the world like dying leaves, soldiers' sons of the lost Empire. If there were an option, I would go at once. There is none. You've spat in my face, and I can only wipe off the spit."

His eyes fell from me, and suddenly he cursed.

"I was wrong, Skorous. You would never have—"

"No, Sir. Never. Never in ten million years. But I regret you think I might. And I regret she thinks so. Once she was your wife, she could expect no less from me than I give one of your sisters."

"*That bitch,*" he said, repeating for me my error, woman-like, "her half-breed brat—damn you, Skorous. He's my son."

"I could cut out my tongue that I said it. It's more than a year of holding it back before all others, I believe. Like vomit, Sir. I could not keep it down any longer."

"Stop saying *Sir* to me. You call her *Domina*. That's sufficient."

His eyes were wet. I wanted to slap him, the way you do a vicious stupid girl who claws at your face. But he was my prince, and the traitor was myself.

Presently, thankfully, he let me get out.

What I had said was true, if there had been any other life to

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go to that was thinkable—but there was not, anymore. So, she would travel into the forest to heal, and I, faithful and unshakable, I would stay to guard him. And then she would come back. Year in and out, mist and rain, snow and sun. And bear him other brats to whom, in due course, I would swear my honor over. I had better practice harder, not to call her anything but *Lady*.

Somewhere in the night I came to myself and I knew. I saw it accurately, what went on, what was to be, and what I, so cunningly excluded, must do. Madness, they say, can show itself like that. Neither hot nor cold, with a steady hand, and every faculty honed bright.

The village with the sickness had sent its deputation to Draco yesterday. They had grand and blasphemous names for *her,* out there. She had said she must go, and at first light today would set out. Since the native villagers revered her, she might have made an arrangement with them, some itinerant acting as messenger. Or even, if the circumstance were actual, she could have been biding for such a chance. Or she herself had sent the malady to ensure it.

Her gods were the gods of her mystery. But the Semitic races have a custom ancient as their oldest altars, of giving a child to the god.

Perhaps Draco even knew—no, unthinkable. How then could she explain it? An accident, a straying, bears, wolves, the sickness after all . . . And she could give him other sons. She was like the magic oven of the Khemian Art. Put in, take out. So easy.

I got up when it was still pitch black and announced to my body-slave and the man at the door I was off hunting, alone. There was already a rumor of an abrasion between the Prince and his Captain. Draco himself would not think unduly of it, Skorous raging through the wood, slicing pigs. I could be gone the day before he considered.

I knew the tracks pretty well, having hunted them since I was ten. I had taken boar spears for the look, but no dogs. The horse I needed, but she was forest-trained and did as I instructed.

I lay off the thoroughfare, like an old fox, and let the witch's outing come down, and pass me. Five men were all the guard she had allowed, a cart with traveling stuff, and her medicines in a chest. There was one of her women, the thickest in with her, I thought, Eunike, riding on a mule. And Zafra herself, in the litter between the horses.

When they were properly off, I followed. There was no problem

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in the world. We moved silently and they made a noise. Their horses and mine were known to each other, and where they snuffed a familiar scent, thought nothing of it. As the journey progressed, and I met here and there with some native in the trees, he hailed me cheerily, supposing me an outrider, a rear-guard. At night I bivouacked above them; at sunrise their first rustlings and throat-clearings roused me. When they were gone we watered at their streams, and once I had a burned sausage forgotten in the ashes of their cookfire.

The third day, they came to the village. From high on the mantled slope, I saw the greetings and the going in, through the haze of foul smoke. The village did have a look of ailing, something in its shades and colors, and the way the people moved about. I wrapped a cloth over my nose and mouth before I sat down to wait.

Later, in the dusk, they began to have a brisker look. The witch was making magic, evidently, and all would be well. The smoke condensed and turned yellow from their fires as the night closed in. When full night had come, the village glowed stilly, enigmatically, cupped in the forest's darkness. My mental wanderings moved towards the insignificance, the smallness, of any lamp among the great shadows of the earth. A candle against the night, a fire in winter, a life flickering in eternity, now here, now gone forever.

But I slept before I had argued it out.

Inside another day, the village was entirely renewed. Even the rusty straw thatch glinted like gold. She had worked her miracles. Now would come her own time.

A couple of the men had kept up sentry-go from the first evening out, and last night, patrolling the outskirts of the huts, they had even idled a minute under the tree where I was roosting. I had hidden my mare half a mile off, in a deserted bothy I had found, but tonight I kept her near, for speed. And this night, too, when one of the men came up the slope, making his rounds, I softly called his name.

He went to stone. I told him smartly who I was, but when I came from cover, his sword was drawn and eyes on stalks.

"I'm no forest demon," I said. Then I asked myself if he was alarmed for other reasons, a notion of the scheme Draco had accused me of. Then again, here and now, we might have come to such a pass. I needed a witness. I looked at the soldier, who

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saluted me slowly. "Has she cured them all?" I inquired. I added for his benefit, "Zafra."

"Yes," he said. "It was—worth seeing."

"I am sure of that. And how does the child fare?"

I saw him begin to conclude maybe Draco had sent me after all. "Bonny," he said.

"But she is leaving the village, with the child—" I had never thought she would risk her purpose among the huts, as she would not in the town, for all her hold on them. "Is that tonight?"

"Well, there's the old woman, she won't leave her own place, it seems."

"So Zafra told you?"

"Yes. And said she would go. It's close. She refused the litter and only took Carus with her. No harm. These savages are friendly enough—"

He ended, seeing my face.

I said, "She's gone already?"

"Yes, Skorous. About an hour—"

Another way from the village? But I had watched, I had skinned my eyes—pointlessly. Witchcraft could manage anything.

"And the child with her," I insisted.

"Oh, she never will part from the child, Eunike says—"

"Damn Eunike." He winced at me, more than ever uncertain. "Listen," I said, and informed him of my suspicions. I did not say the child was half East, half spice and glisten and sins too strange to speak. I said *Draco's son*. And I did not mention sacrifice. I said there was some chance Zafra might wish to mutilate the boy for her gods. It was well known, many of the Eastern religions had such rites. The solider was shocked, and disbelieving. His own mother—? I said, to her kind, it was not a deed of dishonor. She could not see it as we did. All the while we debated, my heart clutched and struggled in my side, I sweated. Finally he agreed we should go to look. Carus was there, and would dissuade her if she wanted to perform such a disgusting act. I asked where the old woman's hut was supposed to be, and my vision filmed a moment with relief when he located it for me as that very bothy where I had tethered my horse the previous night. I said, as I turned to run that way, "There's no old woman there. The place is a ruin."

We had both won at the winter racing, he and I. It did not take us long to achieve the spot. A god, I thought, must have guided me to it before, so I knew how the land fell. The trees were densely packed as wild grass, the hut wedged between, and an apron of

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bared weedy ground about the door where once the household fowls had pecked. The moon would enter there, too, but hardly anywhere else. You could come up on it, cloaked in forest and night. Besides, she had lit her stage for me. As we pushed among the last phalanx of trunks, I saw there was a fire burning, a sullen throb of red, before the ruin's gaping door.

Carus stood against a tree. His eyes were wide and beheld nothing. The other man punched him and hissed at him, but Carus was far off. He breathed and his heart drummed, but that was all.

"She's witched him," I said. Thank Arean Mars and Father Jupiter she had. It proved my case outright. I could see my witness thought this too. We went on stealthily, and stopped well clear of the tree-break, staring down.

Then I forgot my companion. I forgot the manner in which luck at last had thrown my dice for me. What I saw took all my mind.

It was like the oven of the hallucination in the tent, the thing she had made, yet open, the shape of a cauldron. Rough mud brick, smoothed and curved, and somehow altered. Inside, the fire burned. It had a wonderful color, the fire, rubies, gold. To look at it did not seem to hurt the eyes, or dull them. The woman stood the other side of it, and her child in her grasp. Both appeared illumined into fire themselves, and the darkness of garments, of hair, the black gape of the doorway, of the forest and the night, these had grown warm as velvet. It is a sight often seen, a girl at a brazier or a hearth, her baby held by, as she stirs a pot, or throws on the kindling some further twig or cone. But in her golden arm the golden child stretched out his hands to the flames. And from her moving palm fell some invisible essence I could not see but only feel.

She was not alone. Others had gathered at her fireside. I was not sure of them, but I saw them, if only by their great height which seemed to rival the trees. A warrior there, his metal face-plate and the metal ribs of his breast just glimmering, and there a young woman, garlands, draperies and long curls, and a king who was bearded, with a brow of thunder and eyes of light, and near him another, a musician with wings starting from his forehead—they came and went as the fire danced and bowed. The child laughed, turning his head to see them, the deities of his father's side.

Then Zafra spoke the Name. It was so soft, no sound at all. And yet the roots of the forest moved at it. My entrails churned. I was on my knees. It seemed as though the wind came walking through

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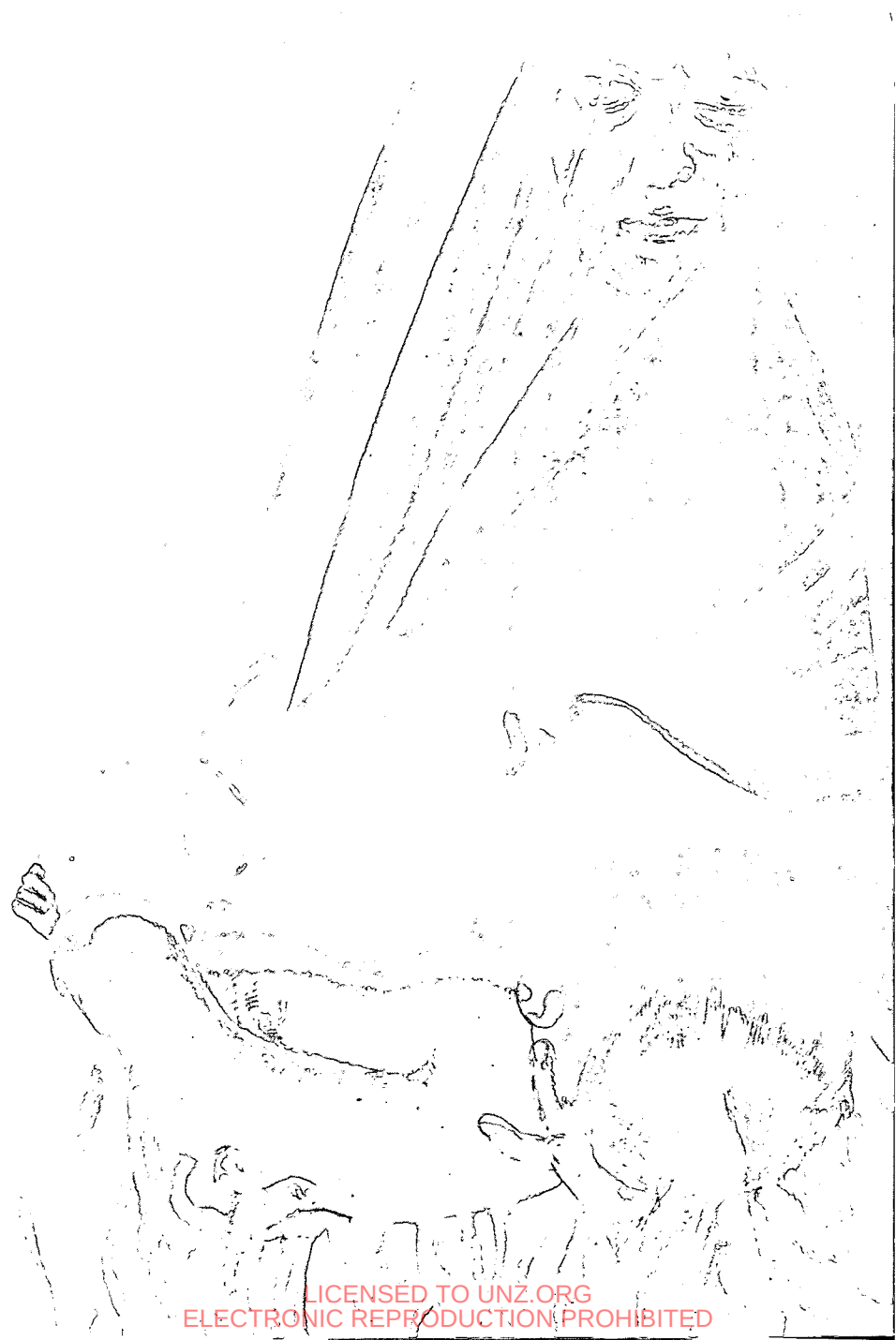

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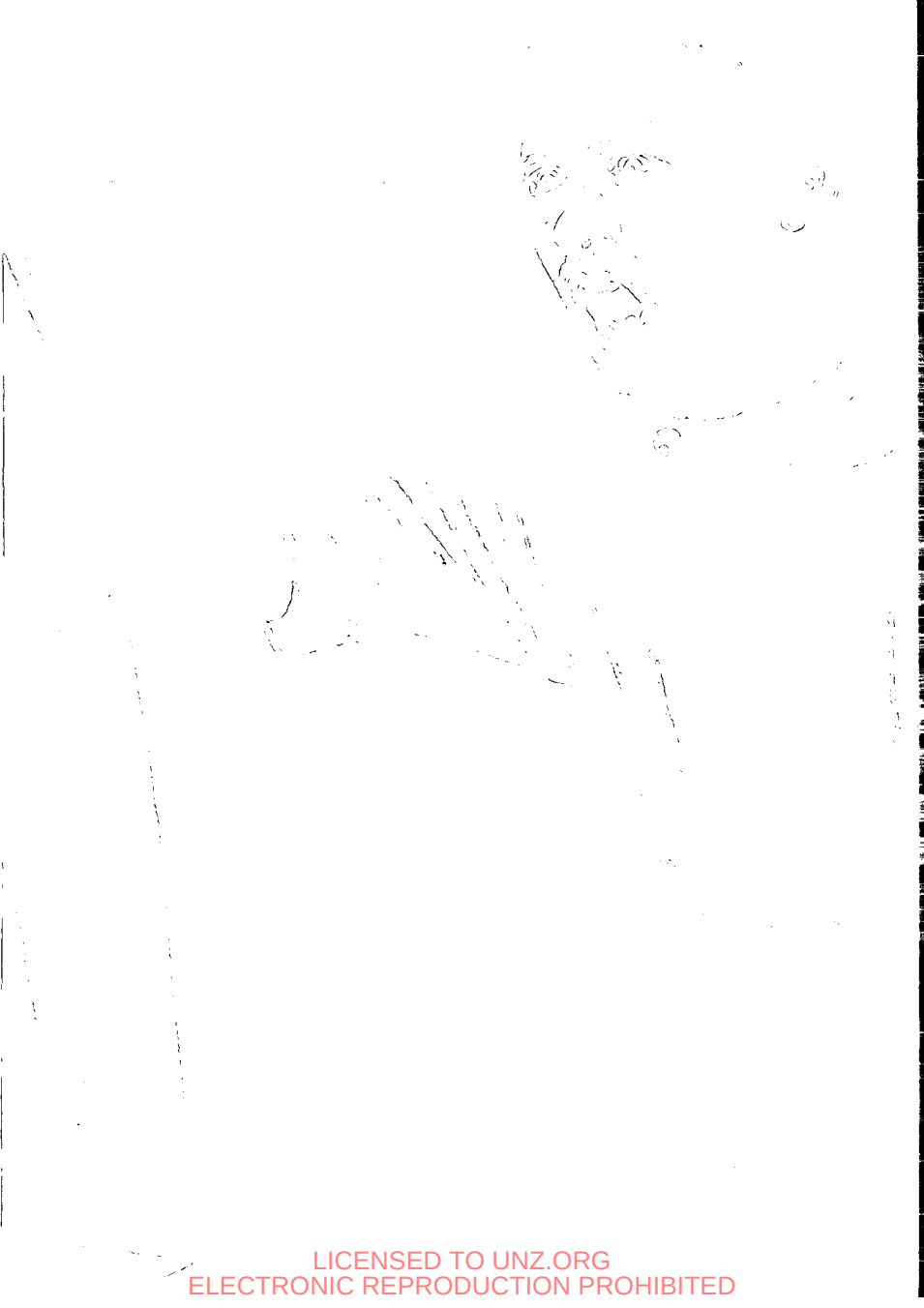

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the forest, to fold his robe beside the ring of golden red. I cannot recall the Name. It was not any of those I have written down, nor anything I might imagine. But it was the true one, and he came in answer to it. And from a mile away, from the heaven of planets, out of the pit of the earth, his hands descended and rose. He touched the child and the child was quiet. The child slept.

She drew Draco's son from his wrapping as a shining sword is drawn from the scabbard. She raised him up through the dark, and then she lowered him, and set him down in the holocaust of the oven, into the bath of flame, and the fires spilled up and covered him.

No longer on my knees, I was running. I plunged through black waves of heat, the amber pungence of incense, and the burning breath of lions. I yelled as I ran. I screamed the names of all the gods, and knew them powerless in my mouth, because I said them wrongly, knew them not, and so they would not answer. And then I ran against the magic, the Power, and broke through it. It was like smashing air. Experienced—inexperiencable.

Sword in hand, in the core of molten gold, I threw myself on, wading, smothered, and came to the cauldron of brick, the oven, and dropped the sword and thrust in my hands and pulled him out—

He would be burned, he would be dead, a blackened little corpse, such as the Semite Karthaginians once made of their children, incinerating them in line upon line of ovens by the shores of the Inner Sea—

But I held in my grip only a child of jewel-work, of poreless perfect gold, and I sensed his gleam run into my hands, through my wrists, down my arms like scalding water to my heart.

Someone said to me, then, with such gentle sadness, "Ah Skorous. Ah, Skorous."

I lay somewhere, not seeing. I said, "Crude sorcery, to turn the child, too, into gold."

"No," she said. "Gold is only the clue. For those things which are alive, laved by the flame, it is life. It is immortal and imperishable life. And you have torn the spell, which is all you think it to be. You have robbed him of it."

And then I opened my eyes, and I saw her. There were no others, no Other, they had gone with the tearing. But she— She was no longer veiled. She was very tall, so beautiful I could not bear to look at her, and yet, could not take my eyes away. And she was golden. She was golden not in the form of metal, but as a dawn

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sky, as fire, and the sun itself. Even her black eyes—were of gold, and her midnight hair. And the tears she wept were stars.

I did not understand, but I whispered, "Forgive me. Tell me how to make it right."

"It is not to be," she said. Her voice was a harp, playing through the forest. "It is never to be. He is yours now, no longer mine. Take him. Be kind to him. He will know his loss all his days, all his mortal days. And never know it."

And then she relinquished her light, as a coal dies. She vanished.

I was lying on the ground before the ruined hut, holding the child close to me, trying to comfort him as he cried, and my tears fell with his. The place was empty and hollow as if its very heart had bled away.

The soldier had run down to me, and was babbling. She had tried to immolate the baby, he had seen it, Carus had woken and seen it also. And, too, my valor in saving the boy from horrible death.

As one can set oneself to remember most things, so one can study to forget. Our sleeping dreams we dismiss on waking. Or, soon after.

They call her now, the Greek Woman. Or the Semite Witch. There has begun, in recent years, to be a story she was some man's wife, and in the end went back to him. It is generally thought she practiced against the child and the soldiers of her guard killed her.

Draco, when I returned half-dead of the fever I had caught from the contagion of the ruinous hut—where the village crone had died, it turned out, a week before—hesitated for my recovery, and then asked very little. A dazzle seemed to have lifted from his sight. He was afraid at what he might have said and done under the influence of sorceries and drugs. "Is it a fact, what the men say? She put the child into a fire?" "Yes," I said. He had looked at me, gnawing his lips. He knew of Eastern rites, he had heard out the two men. And, long, long ago, he had relied only on me. He appeared never to grieve, only to be angry. He even sent men in search for her: A bitch who would burn her own child—let her be caught and suffer the fate instead.

It occurs to me now that, contrary to what they tell us, one does not age imperceptibly, finding one evening, with cold dismay, the strength has gone from one's arm, the luster from one's heart. No, it comes at an hour, and is seen, like the laying down of a sword.

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When I woke from the fever, and saw his look, all imploring on me, the look of a man who has gravely wronged you, not meaning to, who says: But I was blind—that was the hour, the evening, the moment when life's sword of youth was removed from my hand, and with no protest I let it go.

Thereafter the months moved away from us, the seasons, and next the years.

Draco continued to look about him, as if seeking the evil Eye that might still hang there, in the atmosphere. Sometimes he was partly uneasy, saying he too had seen her dog, the black jackal. But it had vanished at the time she did, though for decades the woman Eunike claimed to meet it in the corridor of the women's quarters.

He clung to me, then, and ever since he has stayed my friend; I do not say, my suppliant. It is in any event the crusty friendship now of the middle years, where once it was the flaming blazoned friendship of childhood, the envious love of young men.

We share a secret, he and I, that neither has ever confided to the other. He remains uncomfortable with the boy. Now the princedom is larger, its borders fought out wider, and fortressed in, he sends him often away to the fostering of soldiers. It is I, without any rights, none, who love her child.

He is all Draco, to look at, but for the hair and brows. We have a dark-haired strain ourselves. Yet there is a sheen to him. They remark on it. What can it be? A brand of the gods— (They make no reference, since she has fallen from their favor, to his mother.) A light from within, a gloss, of gold. Leaving off his given name, they will call him for that effulgence more often, Ardorius. Already I have caught the murmur that he can draw iron through stone, yes, yes, they have seen him do it, though I have not. (From Draco they conceal such murmurings, as once from me.) He, too, has a look of something hidden, some deep and silent pain, as if he knows, as youth never does, that men die, and love, that too.

To me, he is always courteous, and fair. I can ask nothing else. I am, to him, an adjunct of his life. I should perhaps be glad that it should stay so.

In the deep nights, when summer heat or winter snow fill up the forest, I recollect a dream, and think how I robbed him, the child of gold. I wonder how much, how much it will matter, in the end. ●

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THE GREAT ATLANTIC SWIMMING RACE

by Ian Watson

Ian Watson has an upcoming trilogy from DAW Books which will consist of *The Book of the River* (serialized in *F&F*), *The Book of the Stars*, and *The Book of Being*. These books will be published sometime this year,

art: Peter Fasolino

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The longest distance ever swum by a human being was 1,826 miles down the Mississippi River. This was in the year 1930. However, the swimmer in question—Mr. Fred P. Newton of Clinton, Oklahoma—wasn't exactly trying to set a speed record. Twenty-seven-year-old Fred spent a total of 742 hours in the water, spread over the best part of six months. His average speed was just under 2½ miles per hour.

By contrast the longest continuous swim occurred in 1981. In that year, 40-year-old Ricardo Hoffman swam 299 miles non-stop down the River Parana in Argentina. (There are no piranhas in the Parana.) Ricardo was in the water for 87½ hours. He averaged 3½ miles per hour.

However, both Fred and Ricardo were swimming down rivers. Oceans are obviously different kettles of fish.

The ocean record is claimed by Walter Poenisch, Sr. of the U.S.A. In 1978 he swam 129 miles from Cuba to Florida in 34½ hours flat. Sixty-four-year-old Walter wore flippers, and swam in a shark cage.

Let's recall one other record: for the swim of longest duration. The women's record is held by Myrtle Huddleston. In 1931 in a salt-water pool on Coney Island she clocked up 87½ hours. The men's title belongs to Charles "Zimmy" Zibbelman, who was legless, and who managed 168 hours in a pool in Honolulu in 1941, the year of Pearl Harbor.

Thus, by way of prologue to the greatest aquatic sports feat ever attempted: the sponsored swimming race across the Atlantic in 1990.

As deputy co-ordinator of this ambitious and heroic project I intend to defend both the concept of the race and the way it was carried out. I address myself proudly to that Olympic pantheon of the ages which bestows laurels of fame on those who perform superhuman feats at whatever the cost. I also speak to that imaginary Court of History whose jury is the dead—killed by famine, by disaster, by disease, by war, by infamy. For as we all know, the Atlantic swimming race aimed to raise funds for the victims of the ongoing drought in the unhappy countries bordering the Sahara.

The route: outward from aptly named Cape Race in Newfoundland, to any part of Europe.

The Labrador Cold Current should take competitors quickly south into the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream would nudge the swimmers along warmly in the general direction of Ireland.

The distance: roughly 2,450 miles.

Assuming an average speed of 2 miles per hour for 14 hours a day the swimmers ought to complete the course inside of three months. Apart from the first week or two, when thermal rubber suits would need to be worn, temperature should be no big problem.

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Naturally there were other problems which it took a whole year of preliminary discussions to pinpoint.

Must the competitors spend all their time in the water? Must they feed in the water? Excrete in the water? If so, how? By swimming in the nude? Must they sleep in the water by using flotation collars or rubber ducks?

Here was where the "maggot factor" emerged: a phrase coined by certain mealy-mouthed journalists.

A body which spends a long time submerged in water eventually takes on a puffy, leprous appearance; the skin grows sick. Add to this consequence of ninety days immersion the "zero gravity effect"—and when the swollen swimmers reached their goal they might only manage to crawl ashore like bloated worms, hardly a pleasant spectacle.

Obviously each of the competitors would have to sleep on board a support vessel; and since the swimmers might be spread out over many sea-miles each would need a separate support vessel, with an impartial scrutineer on board to ensure that each vessel held its station exactly overnight—something easy to check with satellite navigation systems.

Then there was the vexed question of whether to use flippers. Walter Poenisch, Sr. had used flippers. Why shouldn't all the competitors use an identical size and design of flipper? Indeed flippers might be the only way to keep the race within the confines of three months. Swimmers might encounter storms. Icebergs might bear down on them, compelling detours. If the race stretched out longer than three months, autumn would begin to creep towards winter, and the Atlantic would become death.

On the other hand, what if another legless "Zimmy" Zibbelman were to enter the race?

And how about the use of snorkels? Over such a long period constant buffeting by waves might cause tissue or brain damage. Why not swim the whole course with one's face underwater like a fish?

Ah! This would cause sensory deprivation (which might become a problem anyway). Hallucinations and madness could result. Swimmers might end up believing they were cod and haddock.

In 1989 a great conference was convened in Freetown, Liberia; a third world venue being chosen to underline the philanthropic purpose of the race. The conference lasted for a month, and all interested parties attended: the Olympic Federation, swimming organizations, Ministry of Sport delegates from numerous countries, and representatives of multinational sponsors such as Hoffmann-LaRoche, Union Carbide, Nestlés, and Philip Morris, Inc.

Gradually the final details were thrashed out:

A maximum of one hundred competitors. A support vessel for each, with TV facilities for interviewing the aquanauts while out of the water.

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Sonar search in case of stray sharks. Rules for encounters with icebergs and jellyfish. Commercial and naval shipping to steer well clear of all competitors. A supertanker to be hired as a supply and hospital facility, its huge flat deck to be used as a pad for a fleet of ten helicopters, equipped for aerial filming. And much else—not forgetting the international pari-mutuel gambling system for betting on the daily progress of the competitors.

The date for the start of the race: July 1, 1990, exactly one year to the day after the winding up of the Freetown Conference. This would allow adequate time for preparations, selection of competitors, and training.

Despite its romantic Arthurian name Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula—culminating in Cape Race—is usually a dour, windswept place.

Yet on July 1, 1990, it would have required the paint brush of a Raoul Dufy to do justice to the offshore scene: the mile-long barrage of rafts and pontoons with the hundred support vessels moored to it, each fluttering a flag blazoned with the symbol of its aquachampion; the mile of tents and marquees gay as a medieval joust; the dragonflies of helicopters buzzing about overhead; the bright red and yellow dirigible balloon with the starting cannon jutting from the snout of its gondola.

In the style of a sports commentator let me introduce those swimmers who were to prove most prominent during the subsequent weeks. . . .

But no. Wait.

In Newfoundland the uniqueness—the individual or national genius—of these special men and women was still disguised by their wetsuits (identical but for the dayglo numbers printed across the shoulders).

So let us fire that cannon. Let us speed our hundred swimmers on their way. Let us jumpcut many days hence to that morning when the leading support vessels had all quit the Labrador Cold Current for the Gulf Stream, and when our aquachampions first appeared on deck at dawn to be televised to the world no longer clad in black rubber but only in their native skins (well greased), their waddling Penguin-feet, and their swimming costumes.

Let me introduce the dandy of the swimmers, Monsieur Jean-Pierre Bouvard with his slim twiddly waxed moustaches and his long tricolor *maillot* as worn at Deauville circa 1890.

And tough, suave, imperturbable Captain the Honorable Jim Turville-Hamilton, gentleman athlete and officer in Britain's Special Air Services whose pinstripe trunks were embroidered with rolled umbrellas.

And "the Zen swimmer," Toshiro Tanaka, tattooed with a kamikaze headband, his ears amputated to improve the streamlining of his body.

And "the Marxist-Leninist swimmer" from little Albania, Comrade Zug, who wore microfilm editions of selected works of Stalin and *The*

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Collected Speeches of Enver Hoxha stapled to his brow. Through an interpreter Comrade Zug announced himself forever at war with the revisionist U.S.S.R. swimmer, lovely Anastasia Dimitrova, and the neocapitalist Chinese swimming ace, Qi Bing-bo.

Then there was "the Jesus-Walks-on-Water swimmer," dazzlingly beautiful pentathlon champion Sally-Ann Johnson, ex-centerfold and avowed virgin, in whose cleavage was taped a microfilm Bible. Sponsored by the Christian Majority Church, she swam for the glory of the Lord.

And who could fail to mention Leila Fouad of the Fundamentalist Islamic Jamhuriya, whose body grease was stained pitch black as a substitute for chadoor and yashmak? Her every passage between camouflaging Atlantic and her tent aboard the support vessel must be hidden behind seven veils. Five times a day the call to prayer blared out from a loudspeaker at the mast-head, and Leila floated motionless for a minute, ducking her head in the direction of Mecca.

In all a total of ninety-six swimmers reached the Gulf Stream but it is these eight champions that we should concentrate upon: Fouad, Johnson, Qi, Dimitrova, Zug, Tanaka, Turville-Hamilton, and Bouvard. (Oh yes, and perhaps we should add the name of René Armand of Geneva for different reasons.)

Let us hasten forward six weeks. Our champions are well in the lead. Fifty other swimmers are strung out over many miles of Atlantic waters.

By now forty-odd others have dropped out, prey to fatigue, hallucination, anomie, despair, and in one case insanity. There have been three deaths: from drowning, from a stroke, and surprisingly from hypothermia. Another swimmer vanished inexplicably.

Most of the surviving competitors are on course, though not all. A New Zealander has veered south into the lower Gulf Stream. Eventually the North Equatorial Current will carry him back round into the Caribbean, if he persists. A Dane did not swim deep enough into the Gulf Stream; its northern branch is bearing him remorselessly towards Greenland.

Excerpts from interviews:

LEILA FOUAD: "I am carrying water across the desert. No, that is wrong. I am carrying water *to* the desert. To the great Sahara desert where men die of drought. Every mile I swim is another mile of water for parched throats. I am a Bedu: I pitch my tent every night on a different wave, but the stars are the same!"

QI: "Mao swam the Yellow River. A mountain is shifted by a thousand hands. The ocean succumbs to a million strokes."

DIMITROVA: "Hope, energy, glory of the future, hands across the water. If I were a ballerina I would dance across the wave-tops. They are as wide as the steppes. I am a troika racing towards joy."

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JOHNSON: "Praise the Lord for my muscles, praise McDonald's for the goodly protein. If I weren't a virgin I'd feel just like Samson with his hair cut off. I tell you all, each wave's a new stripe on the flag of freedom. Each beat of my heart is a prayer."
TURVILLE-HAMILTON: "One doesn't wish to blow one's own trumpet, but one does rather feel like Captain Scott or Sir Edmund Hillary."
BOUVARD: "La question natatoire est, au fond, une question phénoménologique où l'on s'adresse à notre univers fluide contemporain."
TANAKA: "A particle: me. A wave: it.
Together: existence.
Death or splendor."
ZUG: "Death to the swimming dogs."

The number of deaths from the Saharan drought over the past decade was estimated at anywhere between fifteen and thirty million people. Since the race was first mooted, up to that moment in mid Gulf stream, perhaps another three hundred thousand souls had succumbed: 10 percent interest, you might say, on the debt of drought.

But this wasn't the largest number which the media were currently bandying about. Gambling upon the progress of our champions had reached fever pitch. The total sums involved were huge; and of course five percent of all moneys staked on swimmers was to be reserved for the Sahara Fund.

Indeed it's no exaggeration to say that daily betting on the race was coming to rival the world stock and currency markets in the amount of cash changing hands—and because of the emotive, nationalistic, ideological implications of rapid progress or otherwise on the part of Sally-Ann or Toshiro or Anastasia (plus the intervention of speculators) the race was beginning to cause major fluctuations in the value of national currencies.

Thus it came about that repeated cramp and fever on the part of René Armand, sponsored by major Swiss banking interests, caused the Swiss Franc itself to avalanche; and unfortunately the whole of the Sahara Fund was held in Swiss Francs, once thought as impregnable as the north face of the Eiger. Half of the accumulated fund melted like snow in a sunny valley. But we did not dare shift it too hurriedly.

Day sixty-five: an unpleasant incident. Comrade Zug caught up with Anastasia Dimitrova and assaulted her in the water. Before her support vessel could intervene, "Gentleman Jim"—who was only a short distance ahead—heeded her cries, chivalrously *turning back* to assist the Russian.

It later transpired that Jim Turville-Hamilton's father had been in-

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volved in the incompetent post-World War Two British plot to destabilize Zug's newly Communist homeland. Albion had tried to shaft Albania.

Immediately there was talk of disqualification: Jim demanding Zug's, Zug demanding Jim's and Anastasia's, Anastasia demanding Zug's. Comparisons were made with the alleged tripping of American race champion Mary Dekker during the '84 Olympics by ex-South African politics student Zola Budd, following which great protests against apartheid erupted across America; and might have been more serious still if Mary Dekker had been black.

However, despite all the time we had spent preparing for a host of contingencies (culminating in the Freetown Conference) amazingly we had drawn up no rules about competitors indecently assaulting one another in the midst of the extraterritorial ocean.

Zug swam on, in the lead.

Jim and Anastasia swam hand in hand for a while, to the disgust of Sally-Ann Johnson.

Monsieur Bouvard referred to "un crime passionel politique."

Leila Fouad took to wearing huge black goggles.

Day seventy: Captain Turville-Hamilton announced his engagement in the water to Anastasia Dimitrova; and the British Pound sagged from fifty to thirty-five cents. Speculators started to speculate about a possible future *negative value* for the Pound, whereby one Pound Sterling would be valued at (say) minus five U.S. cents. Britain's long-reigning Conservative government declared itself unperturbed. Here was an economic tool at last for canceling out the national debt. The U.S. government might care to apply it one day to their trillion dollar budget deficit.

Day seventy-three: Comrade Zug assaulted Leila Fouad who had overtaken him, by swimming close and snatching off her black-glass goggles while she was praying. A brief, one-sided nuclear exchange took place between the Fundamentalist Islamic Jamhuriya and Zug's homeland, following which Comrade Zug was the only surviving native Albanian. Undeterred, Zug declared (through an interpreter) that just so long as one member of the true Albanian Communist Party remained alive, Lenin, Stalin, and Enver Hoxha were in safe hands.

Day eighty: perhaps due to side effects from the amputation of his ears (his sense of direction being upset by parasites?) Toshiro Tanaka began to swim in circles.

TANAKA: "Seas, a sphere of water
In space; no land.
Straight line is through, not across!"

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The next day Tanaka dived like a sleek seal; and did not come up again.

The Yen also dived. Unfortunately the Sahara Fund had at last been transferred, secretly, out of Swiss Francs into Yen.

However, Zen priests claimed that Tanaka had surfaced in the Sea of Japan. The Yen rallied slightly, then sank.

Since all major currencies were now fluctuating wildly in response to the strokes of the swimmers, what remained of the Fund (to date) was hastily transferred by an increasingly eccentric chief accountant into a basket of minor currencies. Money for the third world ought to be banked in the third world, he explained. Hence his sudden new allegiance to the Vietnamese Dong, the Colombian Peso (unfortunately, a civil war broke out in Columbia), Turkish Lira (hyperinflation instantly set in), and the Malawian Banda (a military Coup followed).

Day eighty-five: an Irish seagull alighted briefly, like the Dove from the Ark, upon the head of Sally-Ann Johnson.

Day ninety: Qi Bing-bo stepped ashore in Ballyconneely Bay, Connemara, and criticized himself.

Comrade Zug arrived second, an hour later, soon to disappear mysteriously into the ranks of the I.R.A.

Arriving offshore, Sally-Ann Johnson declared that since Connemara appeared not to be American territory she would not set one toe upon it. She turned and headed out to sea again, to swim home. A U.S. nuclear "stealth" submarine finally surfaced, and deterred her.

Leila Fouad also refused to tread that soil—of infidels, soaked with alcohol.

Monsieur Bouvard stood upon the *plage* of County Clare, drank champagne, smoked a Gauloise, and quoted Descartes. ("I swim, therefore I am.")

Captain Turville-Hamilton gallantly carried his Soviet fiancée ashore over rocks. (See the feature movie subsequently made about the young couple, the darlings of the world, starring Anastasia and an American actor closely resembling Turville-Hamilton with whom she later ran away, before returning homesick to Russia: *Chariots of Water.*)

Alas, it was then discovered that besides lodging the depleted Fund in eccentric currencies, the chief accountant had embezzled large sums; and disappeared without a trace.

When the residue was withdrawn with difficulty from Ho Chi Minh City, Bogota, Ankara, and Lilongwe, and all outstanding bills were paid, and some prizes awarded, it transpired that no money whatever remained.

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* * *

This should not discourage us! The principle was correct. We need to think even more ambitiously. We need to think bigger.

If the Atlantic can be swum successfully, why not the wider yet warmer Pacific?

This is what I propose to raise adequate aid to save the peoples of the Sahara: the Great Pacific Swimming Race!

The drought in Africa continues. The Sahara expands year by year. We have ample time on our side to organize this even more challenging international competition. I can already see the route in my mind's eye: either from Baja California via the Northern Equatorial Current to the Philippines (only 8,700 miles), or else from Punta Pariñas in Peru by way of the Southern Equatorial Current to New Guinea (about 9,200 miles). The shorter route would take round about 310 days, which does not seem wholly unreasonable—it's well within the confines of a single year.

Obviously shark cages will need to be used. These should be specially designed so that they're huge, giving each swimmer a sense of perfect freedom and space. How silly to swim the wide Pacific inside a little cage! I foresee giant cages twice the length and breadth of an Olympic swimming pool, and a hundred yards high (in case of giant waves), jutting ahead from the bows of each support vessel. Oil rig technology is quite capable of manufacturing and fitting these.

Over a period of 300-plus days the field of competitors is likely to spread out rather more than in the Atlantic. Even the leading swimmers might be half a day or a whole day apart from each other. Might this lessen the keen interest of the world audience? I very much doubt it!

I have a dream. Why should the whole waistline of the world not one day be circumnavigated by swimmers? ●

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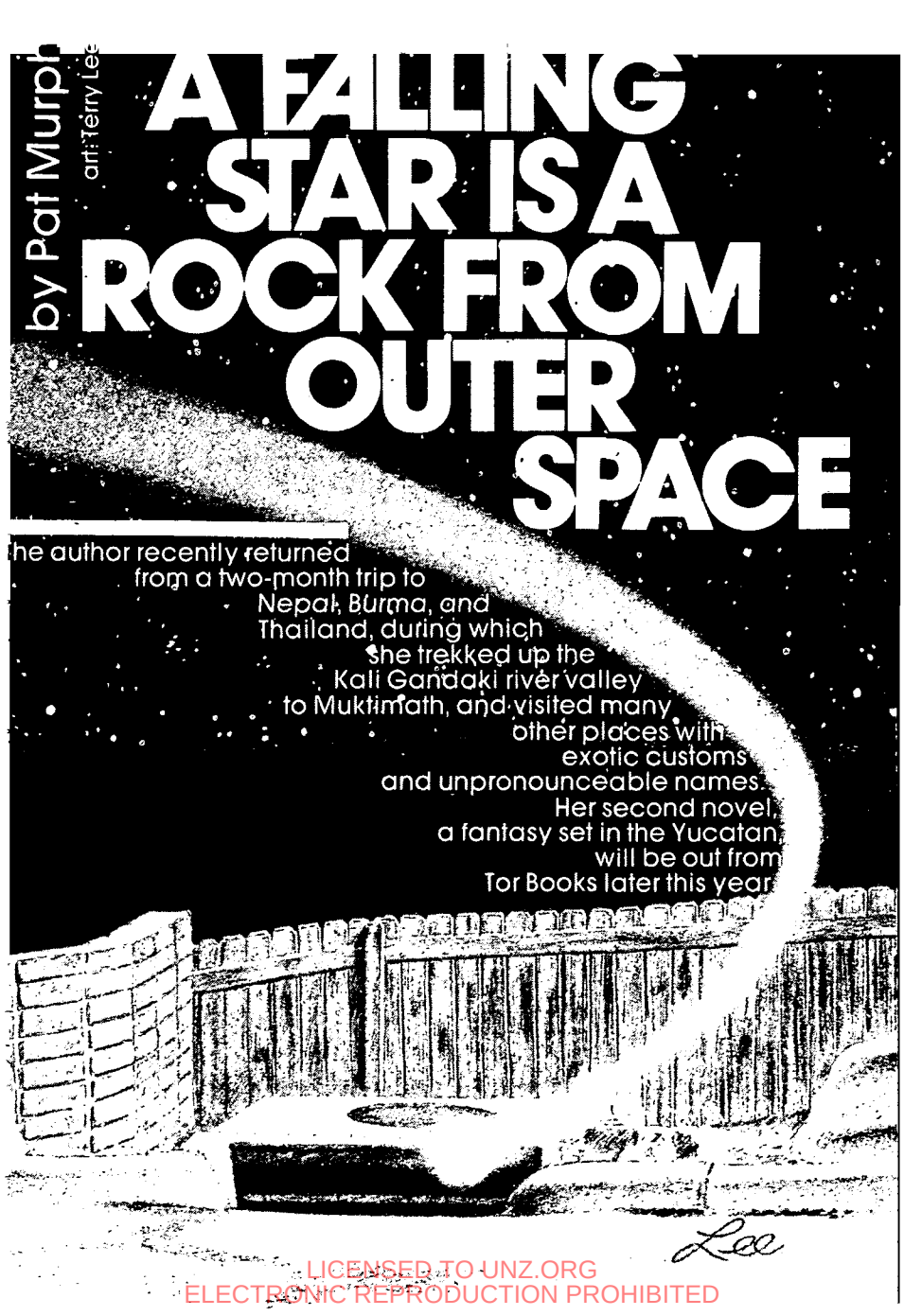
A FALLING STAR IS A ROCK FROM OUTER SPACE

by Pat Murph
art: Terry Lee

The author recently returned from a two-month trip to Nepal, Burma, and Thailand, during which she trekked up the Kali Gandaki river valley to Muktimath, and visited many other places with exotic customs and unpronounceable names. Her second novel, a fantasy set in the Yucatan, will be out from Tor Books later this year.



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A falling star dropped precipitously from the sky over San Francisco, slicing through the hazy air with a trail of blue-white fire. Mrs. Laura Jenkins stared out her kitchen window, transfixed in the act of scrubbing a pot. The kitchen window looked out toward the pair of soft gray-green hills known as Twin Peaks. The falling star appeared over the Twin Peaks radio tower and slashed across the sky, heading toward her house.

Make a wish, Mrs. Jenkins thought, but no wish came to mind. Only an ill-defined feeling of loss and longing. She did not know what, exactly, to wish for.

Looking out at the deep blue evening sky, Mrs. Jenkins remembered another falling star, long ago. Andrea had been ten, and Mrs. Jenkins had accompanied her daughter's Girl Scout troop on a weekend camping trip. On a crisp cold evening, Mrs. Jenkins and Andrea were out gathering firewood. In the west, the sky was a deep royal blue, darkening to black overhead. When a falling star streaked across the darkness with a burst of fire, Mrs. Jenkins called out, "Make a wish! Quick, before it fades."

Andrea, wise beyond her years, shook her head contemptuously. "That's silly," she said. "It's a piece of rock falling to Earth from outer space. How could it grant a wish?"

Then Andrea scampered back to the campfire with an armload of wood, leaving her mother to blink at the first stars in the evening sky.

Mrs. Jenkins was a timid woman, pale and frail-boned, but beneath that weakness was a stubborn streak. Mrs. Jenkins didn't know how, but it seemed likely to her that a falling star could grant a wish. At least, the magic of falling stars seemed no less unlikely than many other things that people accepted without question. Things like wristwatch calculators and astronauts on the moon and horoscopes and UFO's. If people could believe in those things, Mrs. Jenkins felt she had the right to believe in falling stars. No matter how much her daughter scoffed.

Mrs. Jenkins pulled her flannel bathrobe more tightly around her. She dropped a few ice cubes into a tumbler and poured herself some Old Bushmills Irish whiskey. The ice cubes crackled on a high brittle note, like shards of frozen laughter. With the first sip of whiskey, Mrs. Jenkins felt, as always, a touch of guilt. Ever since Andrea had moved away to New York, where the lights and career prospects were brighter, Mrs. Jenkins had relied on the relaxing influence of alcohol. Mr. Jenkins, a fast-talking used car salesman, had departed long ago: one year after the birth of their daughter, he had walked down to the corner market for a six-pack, and he had never returned. Mrs. Jenkins lived alone in a two-bedroom flat, the top floor of a Victorian house that had been divided into apartments.

Whiskey soothed her restless thoughts of Andrea and helped her sleep.

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Whiskey kept her company; whiskey held her hand and gave her comfort; whiskey kept her warm in a cold world. She needed the whiskey when the flat seemed so large and empty and New York seemed impossibly far away.

On Monday, the morning after the falling star, Mrs. Jenkins found a strange hair in her bathroom sink. It was a long red-gold hair that coiled around the drainhole like a snake ready to strike. Mrs. Jenkins' own hair was short, curly, and brown touched with gray. She picked up the strange hair on a tissue and frowned at it.

Mrs. Jenkins was the only person who used her bathroom and she cleaned it carefully once a week. There was no explanation for the red-gold hair. Yet there it was, glinting in the morning sun, a puzzle, an anomaly.

She had no time to consider the strange hair. She had to hurry to her job as school librarian at Putnam Avenue School, where she had worked for the past thirty years. She threw the hair into the trash and dismissed it from her mind.

She took the bus to work. The bus was crowded with kids on their way to school, men and women on their way to work. Mrs. Jenkins sat in an aisle seat, her purse in her lap, her hands protectively folded over it. An old man wandered down the aisle, stopped beside Mrs. Jenkins' seat, and reached up to grab the strap just over her head. He was raggedly dressed in an old sport coat and jeans, he desperately needed a shave, and he smelled strongly of Old Spice and faintly of urine. But he smiled at Mrs. Jenkins, and she, without thinking, smiled back. The look in his eyes was vague and unfocused. "Did you see the light in the sky last night?" He said conversationally to Mrs. Jenkins.

"The falling star," she said. "Yes, I did."

The old man swayed with the movement of the bus. "An alien spaceship," he said softly. "Coming in for a landing." His tone was gentle and matter-of-fact. "I saw it fall from the sky and go down the storm drain. Just like that. Right down into the sewers." He nodded, still smiling at her in a dreamy way. "Most people don't know that the aliens live in the sewers. The government denies it. But I saw them land."

"Of course," said Mrs. Jenkins nervously. She always tried to be agreeable to crazy people. She turned her head and pretended to be looking out the window for her stop.

"Watch out for them," said the man behind her back.

When her stop came, she fled the bus and did not look back until she was safely at the door to the school. Something about the man and his interpretation of the falling star had disturbed her, but she put it out of her mind.

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That evening, when she returned from work, she opened the cupboard to get a can of soup and discovered that all the graham crackers were gone. The empty box lay on its side, brown wax paper wrappers crumpled within. She had purchased the graham crackers to make a pie crust, and she remember using only half the box. She picked up the empty box and shook it uneasily. Even if she had finished off the box of crackers, surely she would have thrown the package away. She would not have left it empty on the shelf. It was as odd and as inexplicable as the hair in the sink. Finally, she threw the empty box away and closed the cupboard tightly, as if closing something in.

Over the next few days, she kept losing things. A package of gum vanished from her bedside table. Potato chips and peanuts disappeared from the kitchen cupboard. The packages remained, but the food was gone. And not just food, but other things as well: a wave-rounded fragment of green glass that she had found on the beach; a cheap kerchief made of silky material printed with a bold floral pattern; a gaudy rhinestone brooch that she had bought on a whim. On Wednesday, when she came home from work, it seemed to her that the things on her dressing table—her hairbrush, her perfume, her jewelry box and knickknacks—had been rearranged subtly, nudged this way and that.

On Wednesday night, she watched the late night news on television and drank a nightcap. Lately, she had been bothered by small sounds at night: the floors creaked as if someone were walking softly in the hallway; she heard rustling, as if cloth were shifting in the wind. Once she thought she heard someone tapping at the window, but it was only a tree branch tapping against the glass. She was constantly on edge, plagued with the same sort of anxiety she had felt when Andrea was very small. As she lay in bed at night, she listened, though she did not know what she was expecting to hear.

But she did nothing except turn on the television to drown out the silence. She could think of nothing to do. Mentioning her anxiety to Andrea would only worry her daughter and make her think that her mother was getting old and foolish. There was no use doing that.

Mrs. Jenkins became seriously alarmed on Thursday morning, when she found evidence that someone had made a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich during the night. On the kitchen counter she found an open jar of peanut butter, an open jar of strawberry preserves, a knife liberally coated with peanut butter and jelly, and a scattering of bread crumbs. She blinked at the mess in the morning light. Could she have fixed herself a midnight snack and forgotten? But even at midnight she wouldn't have been so sloppy.

She put away the peanut butter and jelly and wiped the counter clean, but she glanced uneasily over her shoulder as she left the kitchen.

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At work that day she was distracted. She read aloud to the kindergarteners, as she did each Thursday morning—a weekly treat for the children and a welcome break for the teachers. Her selection was a fairy tale about a princess who was kind to a frog who later turned out to be a prince. But she was distracted and her words lacked their usual conviction.

Later that morning, she spilled a cup of coffee on her desk, and while she was mopping it up with paper towels from the bathroom, she snagged her nylons on an open desk drawer. By noon, her head was aching and she snapped at two fourth grade girls who were loudly arguing about whether a stegosaurus could beat a brontosaurus in a fight. She told the kids that both dinosaurs were vegetarians and would not fight in the first place.

"Something wrong?" asked Annie Clark, the college student who helped in the library on a part-time basis.

"Just a headache," Mrs. Jenkins murmured. "I haven't been feeling well lately."

Annie insisted that Mrs. Jenkins take two aspirins. For the rest of the afternoon, Annie hushed the children whenever they started to get noisy.

At three o'clock, half an hour before school let out, Mrs. Jenkins sat at her desk and checked in the magazines that had arrived that week, tucking each one into a plastic cover and stamping it "PROPERTY OF PUTNAM AVENUE SCHOOL." It was a simple mindless task that kept her from thinking too much about the strange occurrences at her apartment. She hesitated with a science fiction magazine in hand and inspected the cover. The picture showed a spaceship descending in the night sky over a city. The spacecraft was fire-engine red, sleekly streamlined, and equipped with sweeping tail fins. It left a trail of blue-white light across the glossy black sky. Mrs. Jenkins stared at it for a moment, remembering the falling star and thinking about aliens who lived in the sewers and crept in through the plumbing. It would have to be a very small alien, she thought, to fit through a drainpipe.

"Are you feeling all right, Mrs. Jenkins?" asked Annie with concern.

Mrs. Jenkins jerked her eyes away from the picture guiltily, startled by Annie's question. She had not heard the younger woman approach. "I'm fine," Mrs. Jenkins said defensively. "Just fine."

Annie shrugged, smiling at the older woman. "It's just that there's a nasty flu going around. You'd better take care of yourself."

Mrs. Jenkins nodded testily. "I take care of myself," she muttered, and continued her work, avoiding Annie's eyes.

That evening, as she rode the bus home from work, she felt uneasy. She walked very slowly from the bus stop, delaying the moment that she had to enter her house. She checked the mail: a letter from Andrea and

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a junk mail advertisement addressed to someone named Beth Bettbett. She took both letters upstairs.

The deadbolt offered a reassuring resistance when she turned her key in the lock of the front door. The lock was secure—no one could get in and surely she had nothing to worry about. Quietly, she closed the front door behind her and prowled through the apartment, searching for signs of an intruder.

The apartment was laid out in a linear fashion, with room following room like the boxcars on a train. All the rooms—her bedroom, the bathroom, the living room, the kitchen, and Andrea's old bedroom—let off a single badly lit hallway that ran the length of the flat. A door near the end of the hallway let onto the back stairs, which led down to the garbage cans and a tiny weed-choked back patio. Just beyond the back door was Andrea's old room—an afterthought, a tiny cozy room that was just large enough for a twin bed, a chest of drawers, and a small writing desk.

Mrs. Jenkins' bedroom was just as she had left it: warm, cozy, reassuring. The kitchen was clean: no crumbs, no mess. Outside the kitchen window, a sparrow perched on the branch of an ancient pine that grew in the adjacent yard. The sky was the pale soft gray of goose down. It was February and the brief California winter was giving way to spring. For a moment, in the midst of her nervousness, Mrs. Jenkins felt something different stirring: a sense of anticipation and welcome. She had always loved spring, and the monotony of rainy winter days had left her eager for the sun.

She dropped the letters on the kitchen counter and went to check the back door. The deadbolt was in place and the door was secure. But when she glanced toward the back room, Andrea's bedroom, her nervousness returned. It was silly, of course. Foolish to think that anyone might be hiding back there.

She listened at the door. No sound came from within. She laid her hand on the knob, hesitated, then jerked the door open suddenly.

The room was filled with silence, dust, and Andrea's cast-off possessions. On the shelves were high school yearbooks, a collection of Nancy Drew mysteries, and a few old picture books. In the closet hung Andrea's prom dress and an old ski jacket—out of style but too good to discard. On the desk was a transistor radio with a broken tuning knob. Andrea's ancient security blanket, a worn piece of flannel with a faded print of red roses on blue, lay folded neatly at the foot of the bed. On top of the blanket, looking as if they belonged here, were the rhinestone brooch, the rounded green glass, and the lost kerchief.

Mrs. Jenkins snatched up her possessions. She felt like an intruder, but she had always felt a little out of place in Andrea's room. She forced herself to look around, examining the faded rock groups that smiled from

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posters on the walls. The air held a faint scent that she could not identify: vanilla, perhaps, or cinnamon. The door to the closet was ajar. When she glanced into the darkness, she thought she saw movement behind the prom dress. She waited, listening for a sound. When she heard nothing, she backed out of the room and closed the door firmly behind her.

For dinner, she made herself a small salad and reheated part of a casserole she had made earlier in the week. Over the meal, she read Andrea's letter, a cheerful note that talked about her work in a New York advertising agency and about the miserable weather in New York. As always, Andrea sounded quite cheerful, practical, and very very distant.

For dessert, Mrs. Jenkins had chocolate ice cream. It had been a difficult week and she felt she deserved a reward. She left her daughter's letter on the kitchen counter with the unopened advertisement, poured herself a nightcap, and sat down in the living room to watch the late night movie.

She went to bed late and dreamed that she heard a baby crying. In the dream, she wandered through her apartment, searching for the source of the sound, but could not find it. She was alone in her apartment with the constant cry of an unhappy child.

She woke feeling confused, disoriented. She showered, wrapped herself in her robe, and wandered into the kitchen. The shaft of morning light spotlighted the ice cream carton. It lay on its side in a pool of melted ice cream, as dark and thick as blood in the morning sun. Mrs. Jenkins reached for the junk mail advertisement with a hand that trembled.

The letter had been torn open, as if by eager fingers. Brightly colored brochures spilled from the envelope. Mrs. Jenkins pulled one out at random. For $9.95, the brochure said, she could have a picture book personalized for her child. The picture on the brochure showed a little girl wearing a T-shirt that proclaimed her name to be Sue. Sue was reading a picture book titled "My Secret Friend" and the little girl in the book was named Sue. In the space on the order form marked "Your child's name here:" someone had scrawled "BETH."

Outside the kitchen window the sky was blue and the sun was shining, but Mrs. Jenkins could not stop shivering. Her hair, still wet from the shower, dripped down the collar of her robe to send a cold trickle down her back. Moving quickly, she swept the advertisements off the counter and threw them away. She wiped up the melted ice cream and put the carton in the trash. Then she fled the kitchen, dressing quickly and hurrying to work.

On the bus to work, she eyed a disheveled old woman who wore three sweaters over her flowered dress. The shopping bag at the woman's feet was stuffed with clothing and the woman was talking loudly to the

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disinterested businessman who sat beside her, trapped in his seat by the crowd on the bus. The woman was telling him about the aliens who came to her apartment and stole her things. They came at night, she told him; they came out when everyone was asleep and nobody noticed but her.

Mrs. Jenkins watched, wondering if this woman had started by forgetting things, misplacing things, until at last she no longer remembered where she was or what she was doing.

The last time that Andrea had been out to visit, she had asked Mrs. Jenkins if she were still comfortable living alone. A simple question, an innocent question, but suddenly Mrs. Jenkins was worried about its implications: rest homes, senior citizens' clubs, places for women who could not take care of themselves.

Mrs. Jenkins was very glad when the bus reached her stop.

At work, she could not concentrate. She felt a little sick to her stomach, a little dizzy and disoriented. At noon, she told Annie Clark that she had a touch of the flu, and she went home early.

With the afternoon sunlight streaming in the windows, her apartment seemed cheerful and homey. Sunshine cast a glowing rectangle on her bedroom carpet. The bathroom and living room were just as she had left them.

She stopped in the door to the kitchen. Her stomach tightened. On the counter lay the advertisement that she had thrown away. She knew for certain that she had thrown it away—on one corner of the brochure was a smear of chocolate from the ice cream carton in the trash. Beside the brochure, a stuffed toy watched her with bright blue-glass eyes. She picked it up and smoothed back its soft fur with a hand that trembled. It was a sweet little toy, a plump white kitten with white plush fur. She remembered buying it for Andrea's ninth birthday. She had known, even as she took the kitten from the shelf in the toy store, that the stuffed toy was too babyish for Andrea, too cute, too sweet. But Mrs. Jenkins was drawn to it, and she bought it at the same time that she bought the chemistry set that Andrea really wanted.

Andrea had opened the chemistry set with cries of delight. The kitten she accepted politely and set on her bookshelf where it had grown dusty over the years. Mrs. Jenkins had never once seen Andrea take the kitten from the shelf and stroke its fur.

Mrs. Jenkins stood in the kitchen and held the stuffed toy in her hand. The chill that had touched her spine did not go away. She placed the toy on the counter and she backed from the room.

She had never noticed before how badly lit the hallway was. No windows here, and only a little light filtered in through the open kitchen door. She tiptoed down the hall until she stood outside the door to Andrea's room. Through the door she could hear the faint sound of a tran-

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sistor radio playing a scratchy rendition of a rock-and-roll tune. She put her hand on the cold metal doorknob, listening intently. Her stomach ached and she was angry. Finding the kitten made her feel sad and lonely and somehow the sadness and loneliness had become an anger that centered somewhere in her stomach.

"Listen," she said softly. Then more loudly, as if she were scolding a room filled with boisterous children, "Listen to me!" She could hear an hysterical edge in her voice, but could not control it. "You'd better get out of here, you hear me?" She listened for a moment. Over the staticy music she thought she heard something else: a small sigh as if someone on the other side of the door had let out a breath.

"I don't know who you are or how you got in here, but I'm telling you that I'm putting a lock on this door," she said. "A good strong lock that opens only from the outside. So you'd better get out of here while you can." She rattled the doorknob and the radio abruptly fell silent. "You'd better get out of here."

She fled the apartment. When she returned, an hour later, she carried a hammer, holding it in her hand like a club. Tucked under her arm was a brown paper bag from the hardware store.

The hallway was quiet, a brooding stillness. Mrs. Jenkins went directly to Andrea's door. There too the hallway was quiet: no radio, no muffled breathing.

The lock was a simple sturdy mechanism. A steel rod about half an inch thick slid into two metal rings that attached to the door and two metal rings that attached to the door frame. The young man at the hardware store had assured Mrs. Jenkins that the lock would make any door quite secure.

Dust motes danced in the stream of afternoon light that shone through the kitchen door. Mrs. Jenkins waited, listening. Only silence.

She held the steel rings up to the door. With a sharp pencil, she marked the places where the screws would go. Eight screws, each an inch long. She tapped starting holes with hammer and nail, then screwed the hoops into place. The wood of the frame was hard and the pressure of the screwdriver against her palm raised a blister. But she persisted even when the blister popped, ignoring the pain and forcing the screws into the wood. She was breathing heavily by the time she finished.

She slid the steel rod neatly into the hoops. She rattled the knob and tugged on the door, but the lock held firm. She left it then and tried to go about her normal evening routine. She made herself some dinner, even though she wasn't really hungry, settled down with the New York *Times Book Review,* and tried to read the reviews of children's books.

The apartment was not quiet. She could hear the rush of traffic on the nearby street; it ebbed and flowed like rushing water in a river. She

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turned on the radio and classical music filled one corner of the room. But beneath the rumble of passing cars and the dancing tune on the harpsichord, she could sense the silence, the great angry darkness. She poured a nightcap, but even the whiskey could not hold back the brooding silence.

It began to rain. Raindrops tapped against the windows, as if seeking a way in. The tires of cars hissed on the wet streets. Mrs. Jenkins found that she had started a review for the third time and she still did not remember what it said.

She took out her umbrella, her raincoat, and her plastic rainhat, and she went to the movies. A musical comedy was playing at a theater down the block. In the darkness of the theater she felt safe: bright pictures moved on the giant screen, enormous faces sang about love, and everything worked out right in the end. But when the movie was over, she had to go home.

The light bulb on the landing had burned out and she fumbled for her keys. As she stood in front of the door, she heard music and laughter, but assumed the noise came from her downstairs neighbors, three students who tended to be noisy.

She opened the door to her apartment and blinked in the sudden glare of the hallway light. The radio in her bedroom was blaring a pop hit—something about love and betrayal. A muffled television voice told a joke she could not hear and a laugh track roared with amusement.

She ran toward the living room, dropping her umbrella in the hall and leaving the front door open, thinking only of turning off the television and stopping the laughter.

A blizzard of paper scraps covered the living room floor, drifting around the couch and piling up beside the legs of the coffee table like snow beside fence posts. Last Sunday's newspaper had been torn into tiny pieces and scattered like a New York snowstorm, white touched with gray.

The oven timer was buzzing, a raucous nagging tone. The blender, an ancient Osterizer, was stuck on puree and it whined on a high thin note. All the heating elements of the stove were cherry red, and the kettle was whistling with agonized desperation, as if it had been howling for hours with no hope of relief. As Mrs. Jenkins stood in the doorway, unwilling to venture into the snowdrifts of paper, the toaster popped and the laugh track guffawed. A breeze from the open window caught a few paper scraps, swirling them in a miniature tornado, picking up other scraps and tossing them high in the air. Mrs. Jenkins heard the front door slam closed and her breath came quickly, almost in sobs.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly. Her hands were clasped in front of her and she was almost crying. "I'm sorry. Please stop it." Then louder. "Stop it! I said I'm sorry!" Then shouting so that she could be heard over the laughter, the whistling, and the buzzing, "Goddamn it—I'm sorry!"

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The lights went out. The laughter fell silent, along with the whine of the blender and the buzz of the timer. The whistling of the kettle persisted for a minute, deepening from its panicked wail to a bass note, fading to a whimper, and then to nothing.

Mrs. Jenkins stood in the darkness, listening to the sound of her own breathing. She heard a faint rustling and something soft—maybe a paper scrap blown by the breeze—brushed past her ankle. Nothing else happened.

She reached for the light switch beside her and flipped it up and down. No response. The apartment's circuits had overloaded and a fuse had blown, a minor emergency that Mrs. Jenkins could deal with.

Tentatively she stepped into the living room, shuffling her feet through the newspaper scraps. Nothing harmed her. She could see the outline of the television set in the faint glow of a streetlight shining through the window. She fumbled for the set's on/off switch and pushed it to off. Carefully she made her way into the kitchen where she turned off the blender, the oven timer, and all the heating elements on the stove.

She turned quickly away from the stove, half-expecting to find someone watching her from the living room. The room was empty. She listened but heard nothing except the rapid beating of her own heart. She groped in the kitchen drawer for spare fuses, a candle, and matches. On her way to the fuse box she caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the living room window. In the wavering candlelight, her face was pale, her eyes were wide, and the irises were ringed with white.

She changed the fuse. When she threw the circuit breaker, the lights in the hallway came on and the radio deejay announced the next tune. She went to the bedroom, turned off the radio, and sat for a moment on the bed. The bright lights hurt her eyes and her ears still rang with the remembered buzzing of the oven timer.

She forced herself to stand and walk down the hall to Andrea's room. The steel bar had been shoved to one side, unbolting the door. Slowly, she slipped the bar out of the hoops completely, leaving the door free to open. She put the bar in the kitchen drawer where she kept the fuses.

Her purse lay in the doorway where she had dropped it. She picked it up, shook the bits of paper, and took out the box of Milk Duds that she had bought at the theater. About half were left. She put the box on the kitchen counter and returned to her bedroom.

Her head ached and the sickness in her stomach had grown worse. She felt feverish as she undressed and put on her nightgown. She lay on the bed and picked up a magazine, planning to read for a while before going to sleep.

She woke with her stomach in a knot. The bedroom light was still on. Her stomach twisted and she ran to the bathroom where she vomited

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into the toilet again and again, continuing to retch helplessly even after her stomach was empty. For a time, she lay on the bathroom floor, welcoming the coolness of the linoleum. She roused only to vomit.

She woke sometime later and pulled the blanket closer around her, shivering with a sudden chill. Vaguely she wondered where the blanket had come from; it hadn't been there a minute ago. Her fingers worried at a hole in the flannel as she drifted in and out of sleep. Finally, she woke enough to realize that she might be more comfortable in bed. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders like a cape and staggered back down the hall to her bedroom, pausing now and then to lean against the wall. The hall seemed very long, but at last she reached her room and collapsed on the bed.

She drifted in and out of sleep for the rest of the night. Once she woke and wished she had a glass of water so that she could wash the taste of vomit from her mouth. The next time she woke, she discovered a glass of water on her bedside table. She sipped it gratefully and did not question its presence.

In the morning, she woke briefly, then drifted back to sleep. She slept sporadically, and each time she woke she found a gift on the table beside her: a glass of orange juice from the pitcher in the refrigerator; a cup of hot mint tea sweetened with honey; two slices of toast, still warm from the toaster; the stuffed white kitten with its blue-glass eyes.

Late in the afternoon, she fell sound asleep again and slept through until morning. She woke early, feeling ravenous, and wandered into the living room. The paper scraps had been swept into a paper bag and a jam jar on the kitchen table was crammed full of dandelions and yellow mustard flowers, gathered, she suspected, from the back patio. The box of Milk Duds was empty.

The rain had stopped and the sky was clearing: pale blue with a border of white lace clouds. A rainbow curved over the radio tower on Twin Peaks.

She thought about what it would be like to be young, lonely, and far from home. Then she smiled at the bouquet of ragged flowers. Children could be thoughtless, but they meant well.

The apartment was quiet, but it seemed filled with a kind of warmth, a cozy feeling, like the sound of a cat purring or the touch of sunshine on bare skin. Mrs. Jenkins threw away the empty Milk Duds box, added more water to the jar of flowers, and fixed herself some scrambled eggs for breakfast. As she worked, she hummed to herself, a tuneless happy sound.

She folded the blanket that had covered her when she lay on the bathroom floor, recognizing the worn sky-blue flannel as Andrea's se-

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curity blanket. Mrs. Jenkins left it at the door to Andrea's room. Inside the room, the transistor radio played softly.

When she went out to get a Sunday paper, Mrs. Jenkins stopped by the corner market to buy another carton of chocolate ice cream and a box of graham crackers. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Lucius Shepard began publishing in 1983, and in a very short time has become one of the most popular and prolific new writers in science fiction, as well as a frequent contributer to *IAsfm*. Last year Shepard won the John W. Campbell Award as the year's Best New Writer, as well as being on the Nebula Award Final Ballot an unprecedented three times, in three separate categories; he also showed up on the Final Hugo Ballot twice in 1984, as well as being a finalist for the British Fantasy Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and the World Fantasy Award. He returns to *IAsfm* next issue with possibly his best story yet, our April cover story, "R&R"—a powerful, hard-hitting, and eerily-beautiful story of future war, and the haunted men and women who wage it. "R&R" is sure to be one of 1986's major stories; don't miss it.

Our April Viewpoint is an examination of future war from yet another angle: "Science Fiction and War," by Nebula and Hugo Award-winner Joe Haldeman, no stranger himself to either topic, or to the ways in which they can be combined. Also in April, Walter Jon Williams makes his *IAsfm* debut with a fast-paced and hard-edged novelette, "Panzerboy"; hot new writer Kim Stanley Robinson gives us a brilliant, bittersweet glimpse of what it feels like to be "Down and Out in the Year 2000"; National Book Award-winner Lisa Goldstein lets us eavesdrop on some very chilling "Daily Voices"; and in "Pièce De Résistance," Judith Tarr, in her *IAsfm* debut, treats us to a gentle and witty medieval fantasy about food, and the magic of its making. Plus all our usual columns and features. Look for the April issue on your newsstands on March 11, 1986, or subscribe today.

Coming up in future issues: big new novellas by James Tiptree Jr., George R.R. Martin, and James Patrick Kelly, plus major new stories by Connie Willis, Bruce Sterling, Brian W. Aldiss, Orson Scott Card, Michael Bishop, and many others.

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Come join an amoral traveler's chilling joyride . . .

by John Kessel

art: J.K. Potter

THE PURE PRODUCT

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I arrived in Kansas City at one o'clock on the afternoon of the thirteenth of August. A Tuesday. I was driving the beige 1983 Chevrolet Citation that I had stolen two days earlier in Pocatello, Idaho. The Kansas plates on the car I'd taken from a different car in a parking lot in Salt Lake City. Salt Lake City was founded by the Mormons, whose God tells them that in the future Jesus Christ will come again.

I drove through Kansas City with the windows open and the sun beating down through the windshield. The car had no air conditioning and my shirt was stuck to my back from seven hours behind the wheel. Finally I found a hardware store, "Hector's" on Wornall. I pulled into the lot. The Citation's engine dieseled after I turned off the ignition; I pumped the accelerator once and it coughed and died. The heat was like syrup. The sun drove shadows deep into corners, left them flattened at the feet of the people on the sidewalk. It made the plate glass of the store window into a dark negative of the positive print that was Wornall Avenue. August.

The man behind the counter in the hardware store I took to be Hector himself. He looked like Hector, slain in vengeance beneath the walls of paintbrushes—the kind of semi-friendly, publicly optimistic man who would tell you about his good wife and his ten-penny nails. I bought a gallon of kerosene and a plastic paint funnel, put them into the trunk of the Citation, then walked down the block to the Mark Twain Bank. Mark Twain died at the age of seventy-five with a heart full of bitter accusations against the Calvinist god and no hope for the future of humanity. Inside the bank I went to one of the desks, at which sat a Nice Young Lady. I asked about starting a business checking account. She gave me a form to fill out, then sent me to the office of Mr. Graves.

Mr. Graves wielded a formidable handshake. "What can I do for you, Mr . . . ?"

"Tillotsen. Gerald Tillotsen," I said. Gerald Tillotsen, of Tacoma, Washington, died of diphtheria at the age of four weeks—on September 24, 1938. I have a copy of his birth certificate.

"I'm new to Kansas City. I'd like to open a business account here, and perhaps take out a loan. I trust this is a reputable bank? What's your exposure in Brazil?" I looked around the office as if Graves were hiding a woman behind the hatstand, then flashed him my most ingratiating smile.

Mr. Graves did his best. He tried smiling back, then looked as if he had decided to ignore my little joke. "We're very sound, Mr. Tillotsen."

I continued smiling.

"What kind of business do you own?"

"I'm in insurance. Mutual Assurance of Hartford. Our regional office

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is in Oklahoma City, and I'm setting up an agency here, at 103rd and State Line." Just off the interstate.

He examined the form I had given him. His absorption was too tempting.

"Maybe I can fix you up with a life policy? You look like dead meat."

Graves' head snapped up, his mouth half open. He closed it and watched me guardedly. The dullness of it all! How I tire. He was like some cow, like most of the rest of you in this silly age, unwilling to break the rules in order to take offense. "Did he really say that?" he was thinking. "If he did say that, was that his idea of a joke? What is he after? He looks normal enough." I did look normal, exactly like an insurance agent. I was the right kind of person, and I could do anything. If at times I grate, if at times I fall a little short of or go a little beyond convention, there is not one of you who can call me to account.

Mr. Graves was coming around. All business.

"Ah—yes, Mr. Tillotsen. If you'll wait a moment, I'm sure we can take care of this checking account. As for the loan . . ."

"Forget it."

That should have stopped him. He should have asked after my credentials, he should have done a dozen things. He looked at me, and I stared calmly back at him. And I knew that, looking into my honest blue eyes, he could not think of a thing.

"I'll just start the checking account now with this money order," I said, reaching into my pocket. "That will be acceptable, won't it?"

"It will be fine," he said. He took the completed form and the order over to one of the secretaries while I sat at the desk. I lit a cigar and blew some smoke rings. The money order had been purchased the day before in a post office in Denver. It was for thirty dollars. I didn't intend to use the account very long. Graves returned with my sample checks, shook hands earnestly, and wished me a good day. Have a *good* day, he said. I *will,* I said.

Outside, the heat was still stifling. I took off my sportcoat. I was sweating so much I had to check my hair in the sideview mirror of my car. I walked down the street to a liquor store and bought a bottle of chardonnay and a bottle of Chivas Regal. I got some paper cups from a nearby grocery. One final errand, then I could relax for a few hours.

In the shopping center I had told Graves would be the location for my nonexistent insurance office, there was a sporting goods store. It was about three o'clock when I parked in the lot and ambled into the shop. I looked at various golf clubs: irons, woods, even one set with fiberglass shafts. Finally I selected a set of eight Spaulding irons with matching woods, a large bag, and several boxes of Topflites. The salesman, who had been occupied with another customer at the rear of the store, hustled

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up, his eyes full of commission money. I gave him little time to think. The total cost was $612.32. I paid with a check drawn on my new account, cordially thanked the man, and had him carry all the equipment out to the trunk of the car.

I drove to a park near the bank; Loose Park, they called it. I felt loose. Cut loose, drifting free, like one of the kites people were flying in the park that had broken its string and was ascending into the sun. Beneath the trees it was still hot, though the sunlight was reduced to a shuffling of light and shadow on the brown grass. Kids ran, jumped, swung on playground equipment. I uncorked my bottle of wine, filled one of the paper cups, and lay down beneath a tree, enjoying the children, watching young men and women walking along the paths of the park.

A girl approached along the path. She did not look any older than seventeen. She was short and slender, with clean blonde hair cut to her shoulders. Her shorts were very tight. I watched her unabashedly; she saw me watching her and left the path to come over to me. She stopped a few feet away, her hands on her hips. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

"Your legs," I said. "Would you like some wine?"

"No thanks. My mother told me never to accept wine from strangers." She looked right through me.

"I take whatever I can get from strangers," I said. "Because I'm a stranger, too."

I guess she liked that. She was different. She sat down and we chatted for a while. There was something wrong about her imitation of a seventeen-year-old; I began to wonder whether hookers worked the park. She crossed her legs and her shorts got tighter. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"San Francisco. But I've just moved here to stay. I have a part interest in the sporting goods store at the Eastridge Plaza."

"You live near here?"

"On West 89th." I had driven down 89th on my way to the bank.

"I live on 89th! We're neighbors."

An edge of fear sliced through me. A slip? It was exactly what one of my own might have said to test me. I took a drink of wine and changed the subject. "Would you like to visit San Francisco some day?"

She brushed her hair back behind one ear. She pursed her lips, showing off her fine cheekbones. "Have you got something going?" she asked, in queerly accented English.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, have you got something going," she repeated, still with the accent—the accent of my own time.

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I took another sip. "A bottle of wine," I replied in good Midwestern 1980s.

She wasn't having any of it. "No artwork, please. I don't like artwork."

I had to laugh: my life was devoted to artwork. I had not met anyone real in a long time. At the beginning I hadn't wanted to and in the ensuing years I had given up expecting it. If there's anything more boring than you people it's us people. But that was an old attitude. When she came to me in K.C. I was lonely and she was something new.

"Okay," I said. "It's not much, but you can come for the ride. Do you want to?"

She smiled and said yes.

As we walked to my car, she brushed her hip against my leg. I switched the bottle to my left hand and put my arm around her shoulders in a fatherly way. We got into the front seat, beneath the trees on a street at the edge of the park. It was quiet. I reached over, grabbed her hair at the nape of her neck and jerked her face toward me, covering her little mouth with mine. Surprise: she threw her arms around my neck, sliding across the seat and awkwardly onto my lap. We did not talk. I yanked at the shorts; she thrust her hand into my pants. St. Augustine asked the lord for chastity, but not right away.

At the end she slipped off me, calmly buttoned her blouse, brushed her hair back from her forehead. "How about a push?" she asked. She had a nailfile out and was filing her index fingernail to a point.

I shook my head, and looked at her. She resembled my grandmother. I had never run into my grandmother but she had a hellish reputation. "No thanks. What's your name?"

"Call me Ruth." She scratched the inside of her left elbow with her nail. She leaned back in her seat, sighed deeply. Her eyes became a very bright, very hard blue.

While she was aloft I got out, opened the trunk, emptied the rest of the chardonnay into the gutter and used the funnel to fill the bottle with kerosene. I plugged it with part of the cork and a kerosene-soaked rag. Afternoon was sliding into evening as I started the car and cruised down one of the residential streets. The houses were like those of any city or town of that era of the midwest USA: white frame, forty or fifty years old, with large porches and small front yards. Dying elm trees hung over the street. Shadows stretched across the sidewalks. Ruth's nose wrinkled; she turned her face lazily toward me, saw the kerosene bottle, and smiled.

Ahead on the left-hand sidewalk I saw a man walking leisurely. He was an average sort of man, middle-aged, probably just returning from work, enjoying the quiet pause dusk was bringing to the hot day. It might have been Hector; it might have been Graves. It might have been any one of you. I punched the cigarette lighter, readied the bottle in my right

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hand, steering with my leg as the car moved slowly forward. "Let me help," Ruth said. She reached out and steadied the wheel with her slender fingertips. The lighter popped out. I touched it to the rag; it smoldered and caught. Greasy smoke stung my eyes. By now the man had noticed us. I hung my arm, holding the bottle, out the window. As we passed him, I tossed the bottle at the sidewalk like a newsboy tossing a rolled-up newspaper. The rag flamed brighter as it whipped through the air; the bottle landed at his feet and exploded, dousing him with burning kerosene. I floored the accelerator; the motor coughed, then roared, the tires and Ruth both squealing in delight. I could see the flaming man in the rear-view mirror as we sped away.

On the Great American Plains, the summer nights are not silent. The fields sing the summer songs of insects—not individual sounds, but a high-pitched drone of locusts, cicadas, small chirping things for which I have no names. You drive along the superhighway and that sound blends with the sound of wind rushing through your opened windows, hiding the thrum of the automobile, conveying the impression of incredible velocity. Wheels vibrate, tires beat against the pavement, the steering wheel shudders, alive in your hands, droning insects alive in your ears. Reflecting posts at the roadside leap from the darkness with metronomic regularity, glowing amber in the headlights, only to vanish abruptly into the ready night when you pass. You lose track of time, how long you have been on the road, where you are going. The fields scream in your ears like a thousand lost, mechanical souls, and you press your foot to the accelerator, hurrying away.

When we left Kansas City that evening we were indeed hurrying. Our direction was in one sense precise: Interstate 70, more or less due east, through Missouri in a dream. They might remember me in Kansas City, at the same time wondering who and why. Mr. Graves checks the morning paper over his grapefruit: "Man Burned by Gasoline Bomb." The clerk wonders why he ever accepted an unverified check, a check without even a name or address printed on it, for 600 dollars. The check bounces. They discover it was a bottle of chardonnay. The story is pieced together. They would eventually figure out how—I wouldn't lie to myself about that—I never lie to myself—but the why would always escape them. Organized crime, they would say. A plot that misfired.

Of course, they still might have caught me. The car became more of a liability the longer I held onto it. But Ruth, humming to herself, did not seem to care, and neither did I. You have to improvise those things; that's what gives them whatever interest they have.

Just shy of Columbia, Missouri, Ruth stopped humming and asked me, "Do you know why Helen Keller can't have any children?"

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"No."

"Because she's dead."

I rolled up the window so I could hear her better. "That's pretty funny," I said.

"Yes. I overheard it in a restaurant." After a minute she asked, "Who's Helen Keller?"

"A dead woman." An insect splattered itself against the windshield. The lights of the oncoming cars glinted against the smear it left.

"She must be famous," said Ruth. "I like famous people. Have you met any? Was that man you burned famous?"

"Probably not. I don't care about famous people anymore." The last time I had anything to do, even peripherally, with anyone famous was when I changed the direction of the tape over the lock in the Watergate so Frank Wills would see it. Ruth did not look like the kind who would know about that. "I was there for the Kennedy assassination," I said, "but I had nothing to do with it."

"Who was Kennedy?"

That made me smile. "How long have you been here?" I pointed at her tiny purse. "That's all you've got with you?"

She slid across the seat and leaned her head against my shoulder. "I don't need anything else."

"No clothes?"

"I left them in Kansas City. We can get more."

"Sure," I said.

She opened the purse and took out a plastic Bayer aspirin case. From it she selected two blue-and-yellow caps. She shoved her sweaty palm up under my nose. "Serometh?"

"No thanks."

She put one of the caps back into the box and popped the other under her nose. She sighed and snuggled tighter against me. We had reached Columbia and I was hungry. When I pulled in at a McDonald's she ran across the lot into the shopping mall before I could stop her. I was a little nervous about the car and sat watching it as I ate (Big Mac, small Dr. Pepper). She did not come back. I crossed the lot to the mall, found a drugstore and bought some cigars. When I strolled back to the car she was waiting for me, hopping from one foot to another and tugging at the door handle. Serometh makes you impatient. She was wearing a pair of shiny black pants, pink and white checked sneakers and a hot pink blouse. " 's go!" she hissed at me.

I moved even slower. She looked like she was about to wet herself, biting her soft lower lip with a line of perfect white teeth. I dawdled over my keys. A security guard and a young man in a shirt and tie hurried

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out of the mall entrance and scanned the lot. "Nice outfit," I said. "Must have cost you something."

She looked over her shoulder, saw the security guard, who saw her. "Hey!" he called, running toward us. I slid into the car, opened the passenger door. Ruth had snapped open her purse and pulled out a small gun. I grabbed her arm and yanked her into the car; she squawked and her shot went wide. The guard fell down anyway, scared shitless. For the second time that day I tested the Citation's acceleration; Ruth's door slammed shut and we were gone.

"You scut," she said as we hit the entrance ramp of the interstate. "You're a scut-pumping Conservative. You made me miss." But she was smiling, running her hand up the inside of my thigh. I could tell she hadn't ever had so much fun in the twentieth century.

For some reason I was shaking. "Give me one of those serometh s," I said.

Around midnight we stopped in St. Louis at a Holiday Inn. We registered as Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Bruno (an old acquaintance) and paid in advance. No one remarked on the apparent difference in our ages. So discreet. I bought a copy of the *Post-Dispatch* and we went to the room. Ruth flopped down on the bed, looking bored, but thanks to her gunplay I had a few more things to take care of. I poured myself a glass of Chivas, went into the bathroom, removed the toupee and flushed it down the toilet, showered, put a new blade in my old razor and shaved the rest of the hair from my head. The Lex Luthor look. I cut my scalp. That got me laughing, and I could not stop. Ruth peeked through the doorway to find me dabbing the crown of my head with a bloody kleenex.

"You're a wreck," she said.

I almost fell off the toilet laughing. She was absolutely right. Between giggles I managed to say, "You must not stay anywhere too long, if you're as careless as you were tonight."

She shrugged. "I bet I've been at it longer than you." She stripped and got into the shower. I got into bed.

The room enfolded me in its gold-carpet, green-bedspread mediocrity. Sometimes it's hard to remember that things were ever different. In 1596 I rode to court with Essex; I slept in a chamber of supreme garishness (gilt escutcheons in the corners of the ceiling, pink cupids romping on the walls), in a bed warmed by any of the trollops of the city I might want. And there in the Holiday Inn I sat with my drink, in my pastel blue pajama bottoms, reading a late-twentieth century newspaper, smoking a cigar. An earthquake in Peru estimated to have killed 8,000 in Lima alone. Nope. A steelworker in Gary, Indiana, discovered to be the murderer of six pre-pubescent children, bodies found buried in his base-

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ment. Perhaps. The President refuses to enforce the ruling of his Supreme Court because it "subverts the will of the American people." Probably not.

We are everywhere. But not everywhere.

Ruth came out of the bathroom, saw me, did a double take. "You look—perfect!" she said. She slid in the bed beside me, naked, and sniffed at my glass of Chivas. Her lip curled. She looked over my shoulder at the paper. "You can understand that stuff?"

"Don't kid me. Reading is a survival skill. You couldn't last here without it."

"Wrong."

I drained the scotch. Took a puff of the cigar. Dropped the paper to the floor beside the bed. I looked her over. Even relaxed, the muscles in her arms and along the tops of her thighs were well-defined.

"You even smell like one of them," she said.

"How did you get the clothes past their store security? They have those beeper tags clipped to them."

"Easy. I tried on the shoes and walked out when they weren't looking. In the second store I took the pants into a dressing room, cut off the bottoms, along with the alarm tag, and put them on. I held the alarm tag that was clipped to the blouse in my armpit and walked out of that store, too. I put the blouse on in the mall women's room."

"If you can't read, how did you know which was the women's room?"

"There's a picture on the door."

I felt very tired and very old. Ruth moved close. She rubbed her foot up my leg, drawing the pajama leg up with it. Her thigh slid across my groin. I started to get hard. "Cut it out," I said. She licked my nipple.

I could not stand it. I got off the bed. "I don't like you."

She looked at me with true innocence. "I don't like you either."

Although he was repulsed by the human body, Jonathan Swift was passionately in love with a woman named Esther Johnson. "What you did at the mall was stupid," I said. "You would have killed that guard."

"Which would have made us even for the day."

"Kansas City was different."

"We should ask the cops there what they think."

"You don't understand. That had some grace to it. But what you did was inelegant. Worst of all it was not gratuitous. You stole those clothes for yourself, and I hate that." I was shaking.

"Who made all these laws?"

"I did."

She looked at me with amazement. "You're not just a Conservative. You've gone native!"

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I wanted her so much I ached. "No I haven't," I said, but even to me, my voice sounded frightened.

Ruth got out of the bed. She glided over, reached one hand around to the small of my back, pulled herself close. She looked up at me with a face that held nothing but avidity. "You can do whatever you want," she whispered. With a feeling that I was losing everything, I kissed her. You don't need to know what happened then.

I woke when she displaced herself: there was a sound like the sweep of an arm across fabric, a stirring of air to fill the place where she had been. I looked around the still brightly lit room. It was not yet morning. The chain was across the door; her clothes lay on the dresser. She had left the aspirin box beside my bottle of scotch.

She was gone. Good, I thought, now I can go on. But I found I could not sleep, could not keep from thinking. Ruth must be very good at that, or perhaps her thought is a different kind of thought from mine. I got out of the bed, resolved to try again but still fearing the inevitable. I filled the tub with hot water. I got in, breathing heavily. I took the blade from my razor. Holding my arm just beneath the surface of the water, hesitating only a moment, I cut deeply one, two, three times along the veins in my left wrist. The shock was still there, as great as ever. With blood streaming from me I cut the right wrist. Quickly, smoothly. My heart beat fast and light, the blood flowed frighteningly; already the water was stained. I felt faint—yes—it was going to work this time, yes. My vision began to fade—but in the last moments before consciousness fell away I saw, with sick despair, the futile wounds closing themselves once again, as they had so many times before. For in the future the practice of medicine may progress to the point where men need have no fear of death.

The dawn's rosy fingers found me still unconscious. I came to myself about eleven, my head throbbing, so weak I could hardly rise from the cold, bloody water. There were no scars. I stumbled into the other room and washed down one of Ruth's megamphetamines with two fingers of scotch. I felt better immediately. It's funny how that works sometimes, isn't it? The maid knocked as I was cleaning the bathroom. I shouted for her to come back later, finished as quickly as possible and left the motel immediately. I ate shredded wheat with milk and strawberries for breakfast. I was full of ideas. A phone book gave me the location of a likely country club.

The Oak Hill Country Club of Florisant, Missouri is not a spectacularly wealthy institution, or at least it does not give that impression. I'll bet you that the membership is not as purely white as the stucco clubhouse. That was all right with me. I parked the Citation in the mostly empty

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parking lot, hauled my new equipment from the trunk, and set off for the locker room, trying hard to look like a dentist. I successfully ran the gauntlet of the pro shop, where the proprietor was busy telling a bored caddy why the Cardinals would fade in the stretch. I could hear running water from the shower as I shuffled into the locker room and slung the bag into a corner. Someone was singing the "Ode to Joy," abominably.

I began to rifle through the lockers, hoping to find an open one with someone's clothes in it. I would take the keys from my benefactor's pocket and proceed along my merry way. Ruth would have accused me of self-interest; there was a moment in which I accused myself. Such hesitation is the seed of failure: as I paused before a locker containing a likely set of clothes, another golfer entered the room along with the locker room attendant. I immediately began undressing, lowering my head so that the locker door would obscure my face. The golfer was soon gone, but the attendant sat down and began to leaf through a worn copy of *Penthouse*. I could come up with no better plan than to strip and enter the showers. Amphetamine daze. Perhaps the kid would develop a hard-on and go to the john to take care of it.

There was only one other man in the shower, the operatic soloist, a somewhat portly gentleman who mercifully shut up as soon as I entered. He worked hard at ignoring me. I ignored him in return: neither of us was much to look at. I waited a long five minutes after he left; two more men came into the showers and I walked out with what composure I could muster. The locker room boy was stacking towels on a table. I fished a five from my jacket in the locker and walked up behind him. Casually I took a towel.

"Son, get me a pack of Marlboros, will you?"

He took the money and left.

In the second locker I found a pair of pants that contained the keys to some sort of Audi. I was not choosy. Dressed in record time, I left the new clubs beside the rifled locker. My note read, "The pure products of America go crazy." There were three elibigle cars in the lot, two 4000s and a Fox. The key would not open the door of the Fox. I was jumpy, but almost home free, coming around the front of a big Chrysler . . .

"Hey!"

My knee gave way and I ran into the fender of the car. The keys slipped out of my hand and skittered across the hood to the ground, jingling. Grimacing, I hopped toward them, plucked them up, glancing over my shoulder at my pursuer as I stooped. It was the locker room attendant.

"Your cigarettes." He was looking at me the way a sixteen-year-old looks at his father, that is, with bored skepticism. All our gods in the end become pitiful. It was time for me to be abruptly friendly. As it was he would remember me too well.

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"Thanks," I said. I limped over, put the pack into my shirt pocket. He started to go, but I couldn't help myself. "What about my change?"

Oh, such an insolent silence! I wonder what you told them when they asked you about me, boy. He handed over the money. I tipped him a quarter, gave him a piece of Mr. Graves' professional smile. He studied me. I turned and inserted the key into the lock of the Audi. A fifty percent chance. Had I been the praying kind I might have prayed to one of those pitiful gods. The key turned without resistance; the door opened. The kid slouched back toward the clubhouse, pissed at me and his lackey's job. Or perhaps he found it in his heart to smile. Laughter—the Best Medicine.

A bit of a racing shift, then back to Interstate 70. My hip twinged all the way across Illinois.

I had originally intended to work my way east to Buffalo, New York, but after the Oak Hill business I wanted to cut it short. If I stayed on the interstate I was sure to get caught; I had been lucky to get as far as I had. Just outside of Indianapolis I turned onto Route 37 north to Ft. Wayne and Detroit.

I was not, however, entirely cowed. Twenty-five years in one time had given me the right instincts, and with the coming of evening and the friendly insects to sing me along, the boredom of the road became a new recklessness. Hadn't I already been seen by too many people in those twenty-five years? Thousands had looked into my honest face—and where were they? Ruth had reminded me that I was not stuck here. I would soon make an end to this latest adventure one way or another, and once I had done so, there would be no reason in god's green world to suspect me.

And so: north of Ft. Wayne, on Highway 6 east, a deserted country road (what was he doing there?), I pulled over to pick up a young hitchhiker. He wore a battered black leather jacket. His hair was short on the sides, stuck up in spikes on top, hung over his collar in back; one side was carrot-orange, the other brown with a white streak. His sign, pinned to a knapsack, said "?" He threw the pack into the back seat and climbed into the front.

"Thanks for picking me up." He did not sound like he meant it. "Where you going?"

"Flint. How about you?"

"Flint's as good as anywhere."

"Suit yourself." We got up to speed. I was completely calm. "You should fasten your seat belt," I said.

"Why?"

The surly type. "It's not just a good idea. It's the Law."

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"How about turning on the light." He pulled a crossword puzzle book and a pencil from his jacket pocket. I flicked on the domelight for him.

"I like to see a young man improve himself," I said.

His look was an almost audible sigh. "What's a five-letter word for 'the lowest point?' "

"Nadir," I replied.

"That's right. How about 'widespread'; four letters."

"Rife."

"You're pretty good." He stared at the crossword for a minute, then suddenly rolled down his window and threw the book, and the pencil, out of the car. He rolled up the window and stared at his reflection in it, his back to me. I couldn't let him get off that easily. I turned off the interior light and the darkness leapt inside.

"What's your name, son? What are you so mad about?"

"Milo. Look, are you queer? If you are, it doesn't matter to me but it will cost you . . . if you want to do anything about it."

I smiled and adjusted the rear-view mirror so I could watch him—and he could watch me. "No, I'm not queer. The name's Loki." I extended my right hand, keeping my eyes on the road.

He looked at the hand. "Loki?"

As good a name as any. "Yes. Same as the Norse god."

He laughed. "Sure, Loki. Anything you like. Fuck you."

Such a musical voice. "Now there you go. Seems to me, Milo—if you don't mind my giving you my unsolicited opinion—that you have something of an attitude problem." I punched the cigarette lighter, reached back and pulled a cigar from my jacket on the back seat, in the process weaving the car all over Highway 6. I bit the end off the cigar and spat it out the window, stoked it up. My insects wailed. I cannot explain to you how good I felt.

"Take for instance this crossword puzzle book. Why did you throw it out the window?"

I could see Milo watching me in the mirror, wondering whether he should take me seriously. The headlights fanned out ahead of us, the white lines at the center of the road pulsing by like a rapid heartbeat. Take a chance, Milo. What have you got to lose?

"I was pissed," he said. "It's a waste of time. I don't care about stupid games."

"Exactly. It's just a game, a way to pass the time. Nobody ever really learns anything from a crossword puzzle. Corporation lawyers don't get their Porsches by building their word power with crosswords, right?"

"I don't care about Porsches."

"Neither do I, Milo. I drive an Audi."

Milo sighed.

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"I know, Milo. That's not the point. The point is that it's all a game, crosswords or corporate law. Some people devote their lives to Jesus; some devote their lives to artwork. It all comes to pretty much the same thing. You get old. You die."

"Tell me something I don't already know."

"Why do you think I picked you up, Milo? I saw your question mark and it spoke to me. You probably think I'm some pervert out to take advantage of you. I have a funny name. I don't talk like your average middle-aged businessman. Forget about that." The old excitement was upon me; I was talking louder and louder, leaning on the accelerator. The car sped along. "I think you're as troubled by the materialism and cant of life in America as I am. Young people like you, with orange hair, are trying to find some values in a world that offers them nothing but crap for ideas. But too many of you are turning to extremes in response. Drugs, violence, religious fanaticism, hedonism. Some, like you I suspect, to suicide. Don't do it, Milo. Your life is too valuable." The speedometer touched eighty, eighty-five. Milo fumbled for his seatbelt but couldn't find it.

I waved my hand, holding the cigar, at him. "What's the matter, Milo? Can't find the belt?" Ninety now. A pickup went by us going the other way, the wind of its passing beating at my head and shoulder. Ninety-five.

"Think, Milo! If you're upset with the present, with your parents and the schools, think about the future. What will the future be like if this trend toward valuelessness continues in the next hundred years? Think of the impact of new technologies! Gene splicing, gerontological research, artificial intelligence, space exploration, biological weapons, nuclear proliferation! All accelerating this process! Think of the violent reactionary movements that could arise—are arising already, Milo, as we speak—from people's efforts to find something to hold onto. Paint yourself a picture, *Milo,* of the kind of man or woman another hundred years of this process might produce!"

"What are you talking about?" He was terrified.

"I'm talking about the survival of values in America! Simply that." Cigar smoke swirled in front of the dashboard lights, and my voice had reached a shout. Milo was gripping the sides of his seat. The speedometer read 105. "And you, *Milo,* are at the heart of this process! If people continue to think the way you do, *Milo,* throwing their crossword puzzle books out the windows of their Audis across America, *the future will be full of absolutely valueless people!* Right, MILO?" I leaned over, taking my eyes off the road, and blew smoke into his face, screaming, "ARE YOU LISTENING, MILO? MARK MY WORDS!"

"Y—yes."

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"GOO, GOO, GA-GA-GAA!"

I put my foot all the way to the floor. The wind howled through the window; the gray highway flew beneath us.

"Mark my words, Milo," I whispered. He never heard me. "Twenty-five across. Eight letters. N-i-h-i-l—."

My pulse roared in my ears, there joining the drowned choir of the fields and the roar of the engine. My body was slimy with sweat, my fingers clenched through the cigar, fists clamped on the wheel, smoke stinging my eyes. I slammed on the brakes, downshifting immediately, sending the transmission into a painful whine as the car slewed and skidded off the pavement, clipping a reflecting marker and throwing Milo against the windshield. The car stopped with a jerk in the gravel at the side of the road, just shy of a sign announcing, "Welcome to Ohio."

There were no other lights on the road; I shut off my own and sat behind the wheel, trembling, the night air cool on my skin. The insects wailed. The boy was slumped against the dashboard. There was a star fracture in the glass above his head, and warm blood came away on my fingers when I touched his hair. I got out of the car, circled around to the passenger's side, and dragged him from the seat into the field adjoining the road. He was surprisingly light. I left him there, in a field of Ohio soybeans on the evening of a summer's day.

The city of Detroit was founded by the French adventurer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, a supporter of Comte de Pontchartrain, minister of state to the Sun King, Louis XIV. All of these men worshipped the Roman Catholic god, protected their political positions, and let the future go hang. Cadillac, after whom an American automobile was named, was seeking a favorable location to advance his own economic interests. He came ashore on July 24, 1701 with fifty soldiers, an equal number of settlers, and about one hundred friendly Indians near the present site of the Veterans Memorial Building, within easy walking distance of the Greyhound Bus Terminal.

The car had not run well after the accident, developing a reluctance to go into fourth, but I did not care. The encounter with Milo had gone exactly as such things should go, and was especially pleasing because it had been totally unplanned. An accident—no order, one would guess—but exactly as if I had laid it all out beforehand. I came into Detroit late at night via Route 12, which eventually turned into Michigan Avenue. The air was hot and sticky. I remember driving past the Cadillac Plant; multitudes of red, yellow, and green lights glinting off dull masonry and the smell of auto exhaust along the city streets. The sort of neighborhood I wanted was not far from Tiger Stadium: pawnshops, an

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all-night deli, laundromats, dimly lit bars with red Stroh's signs in the windows. Men on streetcorners walked casually from noplace to noplace.

I parked on a side street just around the corner from a Seven-Eleven. I left the motor running. In the store I dawdled over a magazine rack until at last I heard the racing of an engine and saw the Audi flash by the window. I bought a copy of *Time* and caught a downtown bus at the corner. At the Greyhound station I purchased a ticket for the next bus to Toronto and sat reading my magazine until departure time.

We got onto the bus. Across the river we stopped at customs and got off again. "Name?" they asked me.

"Gerald Spotsworth."

"Place of birth?"

"Calgary." I gave them my credentials. The passport photo showed me with hair. They looked me over. They let me go.

I work in the library of the University of Toronto. I am well read, a student of history, a solid Canadian citizen. There I lead a sedentary life. The subways are clean, the people are friendly, the restaurants are excellent. The sky is blue. The cat is on the mat.

We got back on the bus. There were few other passengers, and most of them were soon asleep; the only light in the darkened interior was that which shone above my head. I was very tired, but I did not want to sleep. Then I remembered that I had Ruth's pills in my jacket pocket. I smiled, thinking of the customs people. All that was left in the box were a couple of tiny pink tabs. I did not know what they were, but I broke one down the middle with my fingernail and took it anyway. It perked me up immediately. Everything I could see seemed sharply defined. The dark green plastic of the seats. The rubber mat in the aisle. My fingernails. All details were separate and distinct, all interdependent. I must have been focused on the threads in the weave of my pants leg for ten minutes when I was surprised by someone sitting down next to me. It was Ruth. "You're back!" I exclaimed.

"We're all back," she said. I looked around and it was true: on the opposite side of the aisle, two seats ahead, Milo sat watching me over his shoulder, a trickle of blood running down his forehead. One corner of his mouth pulled tighter in a rueful smile. Mr. Graves came back from the front seat and shook my hand. I saw the fat singer from the country club, still naked. The locker room boy. A flickering light from the back of the bus: when I turned around there stood the burning man, his eye sockets two dark hollows behind the wavering flames. The shopping mall guard. Hector from the hardware store. They all looked at me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Ruth.

"We couldn't let you go on thinking like you do. You act like I'm some monster. I'm just a person."

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"A rather nice looking young lady," Graves added.

"People are monsters," I said.

"Like you, huh?" Ruth said. "But they can be saints, too."

That made me laugh. "Don't feed me platitudes. You can't even read."

"You make such a big deal out of reading. Yeah, well, times change. I get along fine, don't I?"

The mall guard broke in. "Actually, miss, the reason we caught on to you is that someone saw you go into the men's room." He looked embarrassed.

"But you didn't catch me, did you?" Ruth snapped back. She turned to me. "You're afraid of change. No wonder you live back here."

"This is all in my imagination," I said. "It's because of your drugs."

"It is all in your imagination," the burning man repeated. His voice was a whisper. "What you see in the future is what you are able to see. You have no faith in God or your fellow man."

"He's right," said Ruth.

"Bull. Psychobabble."

"Speaking of babble," Milo said, "I figured out where you got that goo-goo-goo stuff. Talk—"

"Never mind that," Ruth broke in. "Here's the truth. The future is just a place. The people there are just people. They live differently. So what. People make what they want of the world. You can't escape human failings by running into the past." She rested her hand on my leg. "I'll tell you what you'll find when you get to Toronto," she said. "Another city full of human beings."

This was crazy. I knew it was crazy, I knew it was all unreal, but somehow I was getting more and more afraid. "So the future is just the present writ large," I said bitterly. "More bull."

"You tell her, pal," the locker room boy said.

Hector, who had been listening quietly, broke in, "For a man from the future, you talk a lot like a native."

"You're the king of bullshit, man," Milo said. " 'Some people devote themselves to artwork!' Jesus!"

I felt dizzy. "Scut down, Milo. That means 'Fuck you too.' " I shook my head to try to make them go away. That was a mistake: the bus began to pitch like a sailboat. I grabbed for Ruth's arm but missed. "Who's driving this thing?" I asked, trying to get out of the seat.

"Don't worry," said Graves. "He knows what he's doing."

"He's brain-dead," Milo said.

"You couldn't do any better," said Ruth, pulling me back down.

"No one is driving," said the burning man.

"We'll crash!" I was so dizzy now that I could hardly keep from vom-

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iting. I closed my eyes and swallowed. That seemed to help. A long time passed; eventually I must have fallen asleep.

When I woke it was late morning and we were entering the city, cruising down Eglinton Avenue. The bus has a driver after all—a slender black man with neatly trimmed sideburns who wore his uniform hat at a rakish angle. A sign above the windshield said,"Your driver—safe, courteous," and below that, on the slide-in name plate, "Wilbert Caul." I felt like I was coming out of a nightmare. I felt happy. I stretched some of the knots out of my back. A young soldier seated across the aisle from me looked my way; I smiled, and he returned it briefly.

"You were mumbling to yourself in your sleep last night," he said.

"Sorry. Sometimes I have bad dreams."

"It's okay. I do too, sometimes." He had a round, open face, an apologetic grin. He was twenty, maybe. Who knew where his dreams came from? We chatted until the bus reached the station; he shook my hand and said he was pleased to meet me. He called me "sir."

I was not due back at the library until Monday, so I walked over to Yonge Street. The stores were busy, the tourists were out in droves, the adult theaters were doing a brisk business. Policemen in sharply creased trousers, white gloves, sauntered along among the pedestrians. It was a bright, cloudless day, but the breeze coming up the street from the lake was cool. I stood on the sidewalk outside one of the strip joints and watched the videotaped come-on over the closed circuit. The Princess Laya. Sondra Nieve, the Human Operator. Technology replaces the traditional barker, but the bodies are more or less the same. The persistence of your faith in sex and machines is evidence of your capacity to hope.

Francis Bacon, in his masterwork *The New Atlantis,* foresaw the utopian world that would arise through the application of experimental science to social problems. Bacon, however, could not solve the problems of his own time and was eventually accused of accepting bribes, fined £40,000, and imprisoned in the Tower of London. He made no appeal to God, but instead applied himself to the development of the virtues of patience and acceptance. Eventually he was freed. Soon after, on a freezing day in late March, we were driving near Highgate when I suggested to him that cold might delay the process of decay. He was excited by the idea. On impulse he stopped the carriage, purchased a hen, wrung its neck and stuffed it with snow. He eagerly looked forward to the results of his experiment. Unfortunately, in haggling with the street vendor he had exposed himself thoroughly to the cold and was seized with a chill which rapidly led to pneumonia, of which he died on April 9, 1626.

There's no way to predict these things.

When the videotape started repeating itself I got bored, crossed the street, and lost myself in the crowd. ●

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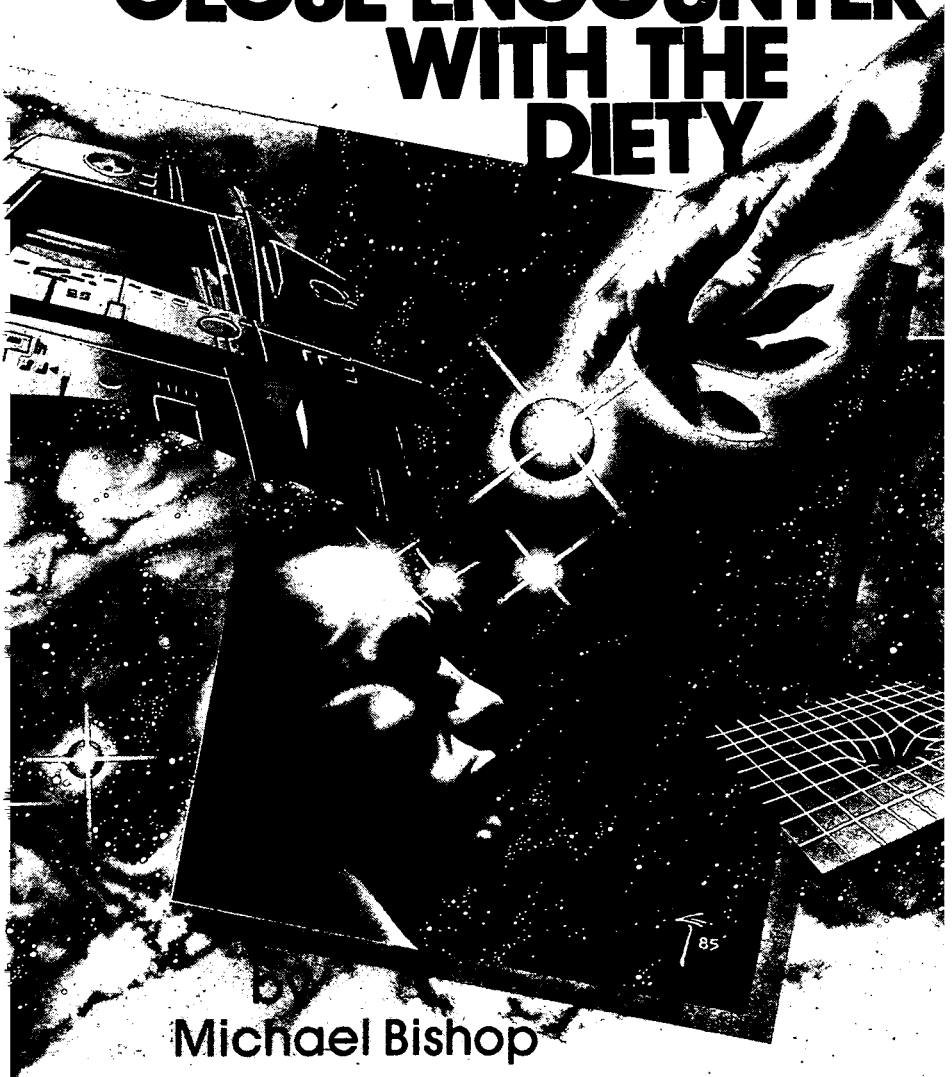
CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIETY



by

Michael Bishop

art: Gary Freeman

Mr. Bishop most recently appeared in *IAsfm* with his deeply moving story "A Gift from the Graylanders" (September 1985). Arbor House will soon publish his latest novel, *Unicorn Mountain*, in hard cover.

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Everything was set in order ere anything was made.

—Juliana of Norwich

So maybe the end is in sight for theoretical physicists if not for theoretical physics.

—Stephen Hawking

I

They place the deformed Demetrio Urraza in an iridium-alloy voyager, wish him godspeed, and shoot him through space toward the bright southern-hemisphere star Alpha Piscis Austrini, better known as Fomalhaut.

Urraza is a Chilean theoretical physicist and cosmologist. He is also a devout Catholic of New Reformist upbringing. In his fragile-looking but sturdy ship (funded by a global confederation of astronomy and physics institutes), Urraza will observe part of the multibillion-year process of planetary genesis around the sun whose Arabic name means The Fish's Mouth.

The honor—not to say the folly—of this expedition has come to Urraza for his role in formulating a Grand Unified Theory of the four major forces that structure the physical universe. To date, his equations have resisted every experimental trial to disprove or modify their import; and his reputation worldwide puts him in a gallery of indisputably great physicists including, of course, his immediate predecessors Einstein and Hawking.

Urraza, like Hawking, has had to overcome a physical handicap to do his work. As a result of his mother's daily exposure to radioactive wastes secretly and illegally dumped near Taital, his birthplace, Urraza came from the womb missing part of his small intestine. More important, his body also lacked every extremity but his head, a leg, and one malshaped foot. (His leg and foot the young Demetrio learned to use as most other human beings use their arms and hands.) Had a priest not taken the crippled infant to a doctor in Antofagasta, better than a hundred miles away, and had the doctor not willingly become the child's benefactor, Demetrio Urraza would have died within the week.

Today Urraza enjoys pointing out that his surviving to become a physicist involved a chain of events as unlikely as the fine-tuning of a universe in which thinking observers might eventually arise. He is an anomaly, he cheerfully admits, adding that of course life itself is an anomaly.

In a sense, Urraza has won a lottery sponsored by the world's scientific community.

The winning ticket consisted of his publication, less than two decades

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ago, of the Grand Unified Theory bearing his name, i.e., Urraza's GUT. (In English, this is an ugly—perhaps deplorable—pun that Urraza finds as delightful as humanity's questing sentience in a seemingly disinterested cosmos.) The prize for drawing the winning ticket, now that Demetrio Urraza's GUT has encompassed the centuries-old hunger of theoretical physicists for The Answer, is a one-way trip to Fomalhaut, 22.5 light-years from Earth.

Why Fomalhaut? many have wondered.

Because, eighteen years before the publication of the GUT that most of Urraza's peers agree has put an end to theoretical physics, astonomers detected around Fomalhaut a planetary disk suggesting that the star is sorting out a solar system similar to the one that became our own. Further, although this process—beginning with the creation of the protosun at the system's heart—may take as long as five billion years, Fomalhaut has already advanced beyond the stage at which a blast of flare gas or of scouring ultraviolet has blown the dust in its inner disk out into the transsolar void. In other words, this star is already well on the road to planetary creation and hence—if one has faith—to the oozy birth and chance-directed uncoiling of life.

Conceivably, Earth will have have died before Urraza completes his observations of the process, for, waking for week-long periods between dozens of millennia of self-preserving slumber, he will survive several hundred million years. Humanity, during this time, will either perish utterly or escape its inevitable local holocaust by removing to other parts of the galaxy. Maybe Urraza's fellow human beings, arriving later, will find his voyager and resurrect him to life on a utopian Terra Nueva orbiting Fomalhaut. . . .

II

"This is suicide," Talita Bedoya, the man's New Reformist priest, told him an hour before the workers at the lunar launch station put him in his ship's life-support casket. Father Bedoya was trying, as she had all along, to prevent his departure.

"Nonsense," Urraza replied. "I find suicide—in my own case, at least—as sinful as you do."

"But, Demetrio, you'll never be coming back."

"Pardon me, Father," Urraza said, touching the woman's sleeve with his articulate foot, "but maybe I see myself effecting my own salvation by returning to the stuff out of which the Holy Spirit summoned the entire cosmos."

"Is it suicide to seek salvation? The reverse, Father, exactly the reverse.

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No one can sidestep death, but I go to Fomalhaut to see and record, not to surrender and die. For God's sake, then, relent and give me your blessing."

"Demetrio, it's simply not in me to do as you wish."

"Then shrive me. Surely, this is the last time I'll be able to oblige myself of the services of a human confessor."

Father Bedoya prepared herself and then reluctantly heard the physicist's confession. As he had done on several past occasions, he confessed to the sins of detraction, pride, lust, and, now that he was setting forth on a voyage requiring him to take most of his nutrients through his veins or in tablet form, gluttony. The night before, he had gorged on genetically synthesized lobster, lamb, and turkey, to the point of deliberately vomiting and beginning again. Although on launch morning, in Talita Bedoya's presence, he did not feel nauseated, he *was* ashamed of himself. Theory is not the only passion of Demetrio Urraza.

III

Outward into the interstellar ocean, the vessel that this man has christened *La Misericordia de la Noche* glides. Urraza, in his control-casket-cum-pivoting-cryonic-berth, has donned the ship with such happy self-extinguishment that he feels himself to be wearing it like a skin. He wakes and sleeps on the outward leg of his trip almost as he would in his modest home near Santiago. He spends a good deal of time plotting quasar-prediction formulae, sending radio messages Earthwards, and listening to the music that he has brought along.

As a whimsical way of connecting to an earlier era of space exploration, Urraza has insisted that *Misericordia* carry duplicates of the recordings hurtled outward aboard the Voyager probes in 1977. Already, then, he has worked on his equations to the sounds of a mariache band; an erupting volcano; Bach's second "Brandenberg Concerto"; traffic noises; a greeting spoken in Amoy ("Friends of space, how are you all? Have you eaten yet? Come visit us if you have time"); frog-and-cricket cacophonies; Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode"; the sweet whisper and suck of a human kiss; and the soulful Cavatina of Beethoven's late string quartet, Opus 130. He has also played grand opera, the eclecticulture mooings of his own day, and some of the eerie Inca Indian flute tunes taught to him by the doctor who saved his life.

Video stimulation—although he could summon almost any image that a connoisseur of either beauty or ugliness could want—the physicist receives only rarely. Such images interfere with his mental picture-making. If ever he chooses to look up from the work at hand, he pivots his

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control casket to a position giving him an awesome view of the heavens. And feels, despite the tinny voices of his human siblings droning at him over the laser link, like the only human being alive in the cosmos.

"This star-flecked darkness is an unbounded fishbowl, and I'm an insignificant cricket dangling in it for bait."

When listening to music, receiving and sending messages, and plotting equations ceases to amuse him, Urraza reads. For long, self-lost periods, his reading takes him deep into the devotional prose of Saint Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, the unnamed English monk who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing,* Juliana of Norwich, Thomas à Kempis, Francis de Sales, Brother Lawrence, Francois Fénelon, and others. Speculative theology interests him far less than meditative works that feed the hungering faith that he already possesses. Hence, when he swivels his computer screen to call up reading matter, he nearly always prefers the committed ancient and medieval writers to the besieged, grasping-at-straws, and apologetic moderns.

Bait? He, Demetrio Urraza? To catch what?

God, perhaps. For the line in Juliana of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* that Urraza finds himself inwardly rehearsing again and again is *"I saw God in a point."* The implied physics of the woman's claim, asserted not with braggadocio but with awe-stricken humility, enormously pleases *Misericordia*'s pilot.

He is grateful to Father Bedoya for advising him to include Mother Julian's little book in his vessel's computer library.

"I saw God in a point."

"The things that He will keep secret, mightily and wisely, He hideth them for love."

"The beholding of Him—this is an high unperceivable prayer."

And so on, insight after insight, until Urraza realizes that the fourteenth-century recluse who penned these thoughts was on a voyage of discovery as devout as his own aboard *La Misericordia de la Noche.* At the same time, however, he understands that this analogy between a medieval female visionary in her anchorage cell and a twenty-first century physicist flying solo to Fomalhaut would befuddle most of his contemporaries. They respect him for the work he has done, but regard the traditional belief system that has sustained him in this work with, at best, smug or uncomprehending tolerance. "Urraza's quirk," they like to call it.

In his life-support casket, the anchorite from Taital smiles in anticipation of the final Gnostic redemption of his malformed body in a universe-ending return to Pure Spirit.

And gleefully mouths, *"I saw God in a point."*

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IV

Eighteen months into his journey, El Sol a glimmering diamond to the rear, Urraza activates the equipment that will ease him into cryonic sleep and then maintain him in this state until his voyager has reached its destination a quarter-light-year above the swarming planetary disk of Alpha Piscis Austrini. Hibernation, he terms this condition, for the weather between suns is an uncompromising everlasting winter that only rarely clicks on the wheeling furnace of star formation. Now I lay me down to sleep.

And hears a voice say, *"Thou shalt see thyself that all manner of things shall be well."*

His ship accelerates. Its drive is a laser-pulse engine. With this revolutionary motive force, it makes its jaunt to Fomalhaut in eighty-nine Earth-standard years.

All but a fraction of this time Urraza spends iced in his casket, dreaming cold dreams and praying to the remotest quasars with the glacier edge of consciousness. His every bad dream is a wintermare, but all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. . . .

Misericordia calls Urraza from slumber. Groggily, he awakens, disoriented not only by his trip of 22.5 light-years but also by the icy trash pilied up at the front of his brain. Recordings and video displays brief him to his whereabouts and purposes, and he rolls in his casket to look "down" with eye and computer-enhanced imaging equipment at the solar system spread out "beneath" him like an immense gauzy target in the void.

Complicating matters is the fact that Fomalhaut, a young white star, has a small partner of spectral type K a few billion miles beyond it. A dark abyss separates this star from the outer edge of the gauzy disk lumbering about The Fish's Mouth. The *size* of this chasm leads the physicist to suppose—as he supposed even before embarking on his journey—that the emerging planetary system is not likely to be significantly perturbed by the yellow companion.

Indeed, the nebulous target spirals around Fomalhaut encourage him to think that in another four hundred million years or so a planet near the star's cooling bull's-eye may acquire an atmosphere, water, lightning-freed carbon and nitrogen compounds, amino acids, enzyme hints, and—most gracious surprise of all surprises—the molecules responsible for life on Earth. To the creatures arising on this world (should they ever look up), the yellow companion will be nothing more than another good-sized light in the sky.

Mother of God, Urraza murmurs. And after many readings eases himself once more into cryonic sleep.

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V

Spiraling down, he recollects reading Juliana of Norwich almost a century ago, an illusory time span that seems but "yesterday." Like the anchoress, Urraza never married. Some, looking upon the crippled body that he refused to "improve" with modern prosthetics, thought him physically unsuited to marriage—but the truth is that the siren song of the flesh has always tormented Urraza. At university, he abused himself, whored, and even played the Casanova with women who would have loved him in a higher way, had only he permitted them to.

Eventually, though, he heard a call more powerful than this carnal siren song and resolved to devote himself to the priesthood of theoretical physics, the fellowship of cosmologists. Ever since, he has redirected the energy of sexual desire into the pursuit of incorporeal satisfactions deriving from either his science or his faith. Like Juliana, like the reformed Augustine, like his confessor Talita Bedoya, he has chosen celibacy as the best means of . . . well, of seeing God in a point. Had I married, he thinks, I would not be out here now, for what wife would release her husband to the infidelity of a one-way trip to another star?

And yet he knows that he could never have oned his soul—to use Juliana's terminology—with the cosmos (as he feels that he is now doing) had he remained on Earth, his major accomplishments in physics behind him and nothing ahead but refinements best left to men and women younger and more intellectually elastic than he. A superannuated genius, he knows, is as sad as a faded beauty or an uninhabitable ruin.

But faith may buoy him yet. And when he wakes again, he finds that *Misericordia*'s displays are showing him a time-lapse sequence concentrating two-thousand years of planet-forming activity into a week's worth of kaleidoscopic images. Rocks collide with boulders, orbiting Gilbraltars tailgate whirling Diamondheads and Sugarloafs, the Black Hills bash into the Rockies, the Urals and the Alps play demolition derby with a thousand wheeling Himalayas, and Fomalhaut itself foams and spits, storms and simmers.

Urraza video-records, catalogues, collates, cross-files, prays, and wonders in passing if his species has died out or maybe built a postindustrial Garden of Eden on Earth. Because radio broadcasts from Earth mysteriously ended during his long recent sleep, he has no way either of knowing or of discovering the fate of his species over the past two millennia, but he trusts that extinction, if it actually occurred, was not self-inflicted. It has been a shaky article of faith with him, ever since graduate school in Boston, that his own kind would come to its senses before any irreversible catastrophe befell it—*"All manner of things shall be well"*—but that belief was, has been, and remains harder to sustain than the con-

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viction that "Everything was set in order ere anything was made." Hence, not only the loneliness of being light-years from home preys on Urraza, but also the loneliness of fearing that, even if he and his ship were physically able to retrace their journey, no real home would exist to go back to.

Now I lay me . . .

The chill descends. Urraza winters again in his life-support casket, a corpse laid out for viewing by invisible mourners. His dreams spiral like the coalescing promontories and jagged clifflets of Fomalhaut's proto-planetary disk. Meanwhile, his dreams are indistinguishable from the actions of the Fomalhaut system or the undergirding strength of his faith. They assure him that he will live again.

VI

Another two thousand years go by. Because only the dreaming Urraza is there to count them, they pass in a midge's span. Not long after the pilot has resurrected again, he becomes aware of a stunning interstellar phenomenon five or so light-years beyond the Fomalhaut system. Streams of distorted light flicker palely on one of the voyager's displays, a sprinkle of lambency pattering against his vision. Excited, Urraza understand that he has "sighted" a black hole utterly invisible to astronomers on Earth.

He pivots to figure out how long it will take the laser-pulse engine to carry *Misericordia* from its anchorage above the Fomalhaut system to the singularity. Twenty years, tops. Well, he can do that—making a jest of the matter—in his sleep. Indeed, for a chance to explore such an anomalous heavenly wonder, he would sleep until Doomsday. Fomalhaut and the planets taking shape from its accretion disk be damned; he now intends to visit the black hole—a tiny anomaly with only five or six solar masses—lurking like a hidden trapdoor into nowhere.

All his life has pointed toward this exploration, this visit, and so Urraza programs into the voyager the coordinates that will take him there. Then he drifts off into yet another wintermare, to dream away the years whose passage must finally strand him at the hungry mouth of the singularity. He also programs *Misericordia* to wake him before disaster overwhelms the voyager.

Twenty years later, it does. However, as Urraza's ship rushes toward the maw of this dark sink, every navigational aid in the coal-black skies is bent, blurred, and refracted out of true by the vacuuming forces at the event horizon of the hole.

How could this have occurred? Urraza wonders. He has awakened too

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close to the singularity, and now he appears doomed to hurtle down to oblivion. He can do nothing to reverse, slow, or abort his fall; and as he approaches the ebony O-gape of the hole, he watches a vast spinning tiara of stars pirouette across the scalp of its event horizon. He sees a mirage of twisted starlight rather than the stars themselves, for the lens of this rotating gravity tunnel has warped and refocused their images into a daunting crown.

Still, some stellar material is actually accompanying him on his fall into the hole. He fully expects *Misericordia* to shudder, shimmy, and, yes, soundlessly collide with spinning chunks of this forced downward migration. Here, several million years too soon, in the prime of his extraterrestrial life, Demetrio Urraza is going to die. Or, perhaps, transcend himself.

VII

The gape of the singularity—the mouth of a fish bigger than the primal carp theorized by ancient cosmologists—lifts higher and higher. The maw looms. Swiveling his screens into place, Urraza begins to do math. This is the ecstasy toward which he has directed his life and work; the formulae marching in jaunty ranks across the display terminals, summarizing, predicting, describing, seem to him not only the abstract hieroglyphics of his science but also the priestly polynomials of his faith in the First Mover behind Creation.

In a period of bodily sickness, Juliana of Norwich saw sixteen visions of the suffering Christ, but Urraza sees the Holy Spirit—from Whom all else has issued—in *Misericordia*'s endless descent into the pit. Down the gravity well, downward to revelation. In fact, the physicist realizes that this specific black hole is not only every other black hole that has ever, or will ever, exist but also the original singularity out of which everything that was made was first made. Neither time nor space has meaning herewhen, but Urraza nevertheless understands that, like a hologram, the interior of this gravity sink reproduces and contains the interior of every other. . . .

And so he plummets toward the Point that exploded, the Mind that made it explode, and the meaning that everlastingly abides in the fateful coincidence of the two.

The metal skin of *La Misericordia de la Noche* has long since integrated fully with his own. Urraza, thus perfectly clothed, tumbles into the naked singularity that has seized him. He falls forever through an anomalous medium no longer possessing dimension or duration.

He is being swallowed, but, in an eviternal flash of insight, he knows

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that he has *always* been "being swallowed." What is happening to him "now" was mandated, arranged, and predestined, with his own enthusiastic complicity, from the "beginning." The light whirling down this gravity maelstrom with him illuminates him inwardly, and by it he "sees" that he has no body to stymie or bedevil him further, and that "now" it is solely his own discrete mind that hurtles beginningwards.

The heretical Christian gnostics believed that each human being has a divine spark, imprisoned in flesh, whose principle yearning is to reunite with the Godhead from which earthly incarnation has estranged it. Urraza wonders—he has "always" wondered—if his disembodied consciousness is going home in a way that *Misericordia,* even with plenty of fuel and time illimitable, could never have managed. He is Adam, All-Man, and he is Jesus Christ, the Godhead, suffering blissfully, and sempiternally, this new passion of being forever torn apart and sucked downward to union.

"If I might suffer more, I would suffer more," Urraza calmly quotes the words of the Savior as He vouchsafed them to Juliana in one of her bloody visions. And his widening mind—his changing consciousness—quotes this squib not from any leftover biological bent for masochism but rather from all the kinds of love anciently signaled by *agape, caritas,* and, given the ecstasy of his passion, even *eros.*

Light falls in upon Urraza. Although this weird herewhen lacks either dimension or duration, the man gets smaller and smaller even as his mind grows larger and more powerful. As his body collapses into a fiery point, his consciousness inflates, acquires spin, and, at one with the Immemorially Cyclical Intention of the Holy Spirit, begins to radiate. . . .

Beyond the event horizon of the black hole that has gobbled Urraza, the universe—by other measures of process than those at work inside this fantastic all-encompassing hole—has long since fallen back on itself. However, some of this fresh radiant energy, a collaboration between God and the representative transhuman mind of Demetrio Urraza, at last escapes the gravity sink compacting all time and matter into the ur-proton of re-Creation.

And Urraza, subsumed by the Increate, hears their huge bodiless voice command, "Let there be light. Again." ●

—for the students at Clarion '85

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(from page 17)

SOLUTION TO ALICE IN BEELAND

Five nonattacking bee-rooks can be placed on the order-8 triangle as shown in Figure 2. Herbert Taylor, a California mathematician, has been investigating problems involving nonattacking bee-rooks on honeycomb fields of both triangular and hexagonal shapes, but he has not yet published his interesting results. I can tell you, however, that the maximum number of nonattacking bee-rooks on triangles of sides 9 through 13 are 6,7,7,8, and 9 respectively.

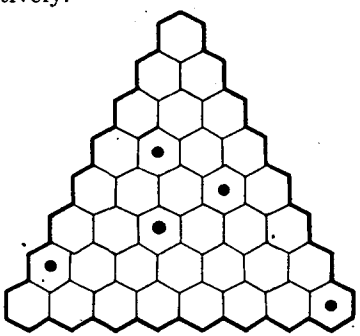

Figure 2

Before Alice left Beeland, Herbert showed her a variety of puzzles involving honeycomb triangles. Here, for example, is one that requires drawing a continuous path off beelines (straight-line segments) that go through the interiors of all the cells of an order-4 triangle. Herb showed Alice how it could be done with four beelines (Figure 3, left). After thinking about it for a while, Alice managed to do it with three (Figure 3, right).

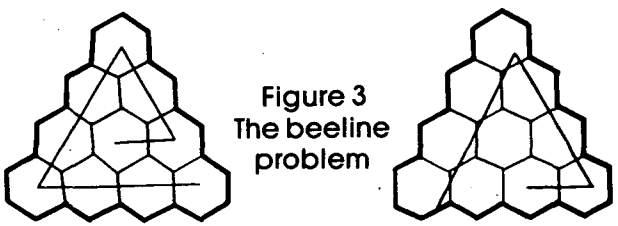

Figure 3
The beeline problem

"Would you bee-lieve it," said Herb, "it can be done with as few as *two* beelines?"

Herb was right. Do you see how to do it? The solution is on page 191.

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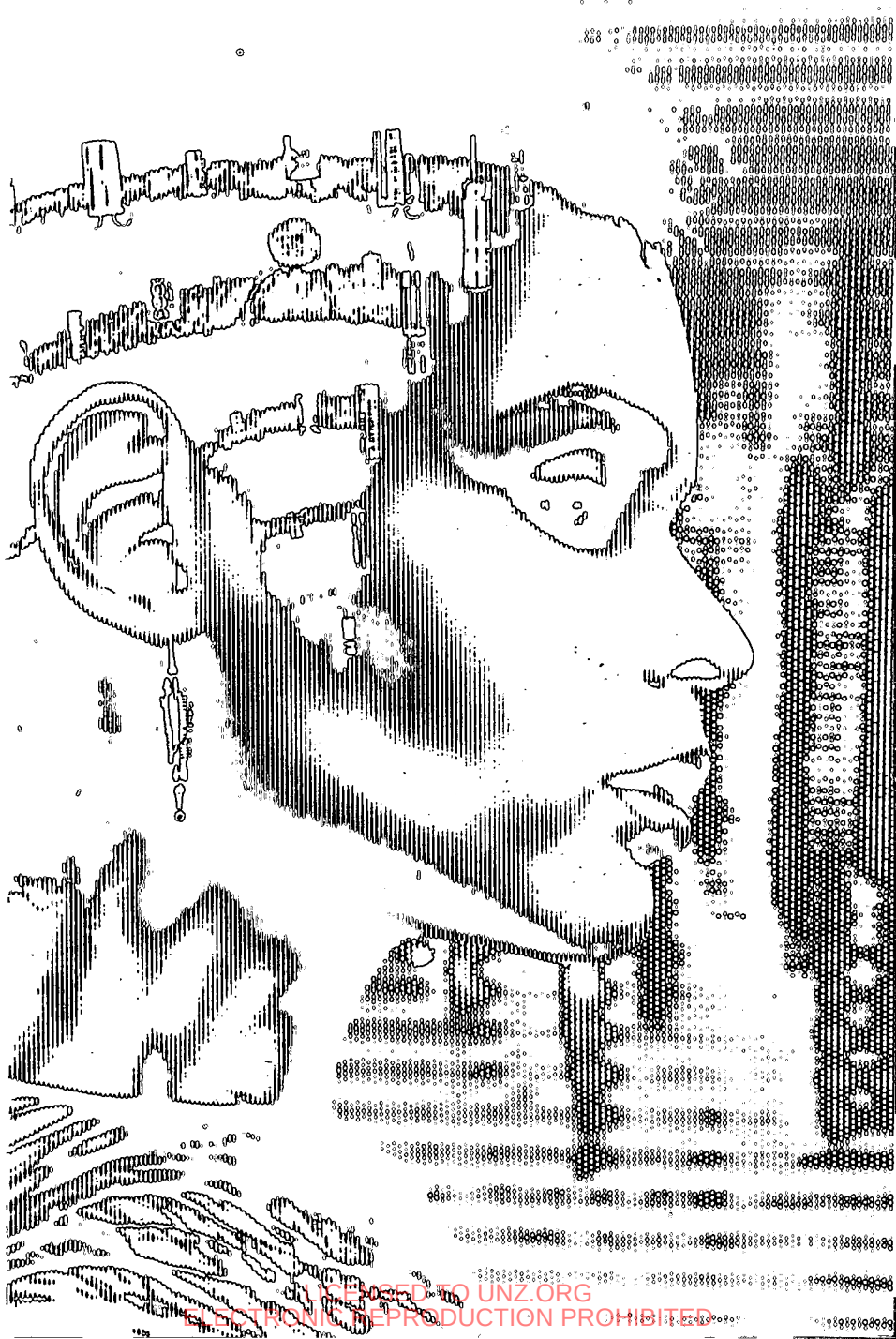

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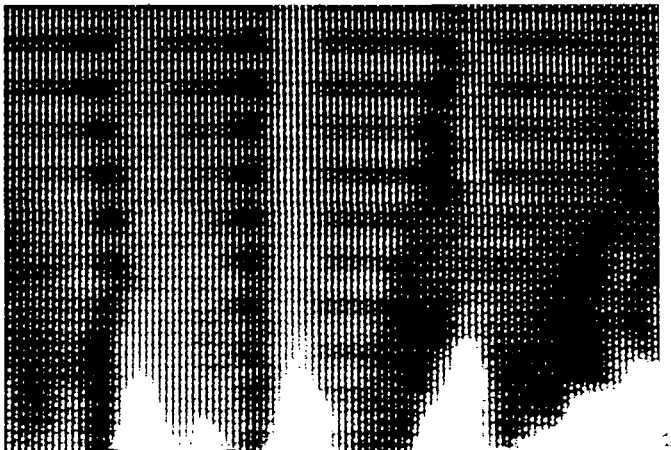

COUNT ZERO

(Conclusion)

by William Gibson

A word of warning
This story contains strong
language which
may be disturbing to some.

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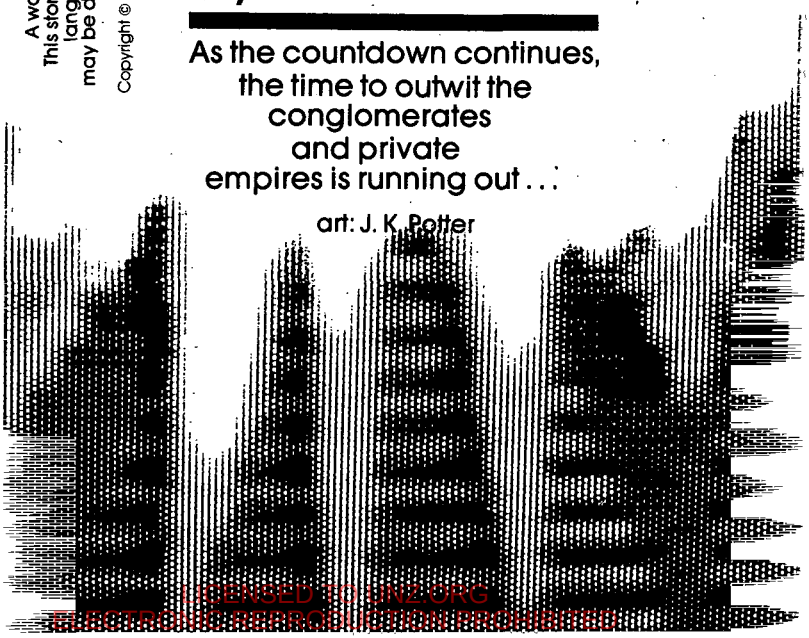
As the countdown continues,
the time to outwit the
conglomerates
and private
empires is running out . . .

art: J. K. Potter



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Turner, *a mercenary specialist in the armed extraction of defecting corporate executives and research scientists, arrives in a Mexican beach resort. He meet* **Allison,** *a vacationing Californian who becomes his lover and provides the emotional support he needs to recover from a brush with death in New Delhi, where he was the victim of a slamhound, a killer robot with a core of TNT. But Allison proves to be a field psychologist working for Hosaka, the Japanese multinational corporation and Turner's frequent employer. Taken on board* Tsushima, *one of Hosaka's executive yachts, Turner listens as* **Conroy,** his sometime partner, announces the impending corporate defection of **Christopher Mitchell,** *top* **Maass Biolabs** *researcher, whose work with hybridomas has led to the first functioning biochips.*

In Brussels, **Marly Krushkhova,** *the former owner of a small Paris art gallery, has been summoned to the Gallerie Duperey to meet* **Josef Virek,** *patron of the arts and one of the world's wealthiest men. Virek, whose incurable cancer has imprisoned him in an elaborate life-support system in Stockholm, draws Marly into a high-resolution computer simulation of a Barcelona park and announces that he intends to hire her to discover the identity of the maker of a series of mysterious collages, small boxes whose contents evoke a powerful sense of longing and loss. Marly is an admirer of the works of Joseph Cornell, the 20th-century artist whose sculptures most resemble the constructions of Virek's unknown boxmaker; she lost her gallery when* **Alain,** *her lover, convinced her that a forgery he had commissioned was an authentic undiscovered Cornell.*

In Barrytown, a dismal condo-burb in New Jersey, young **Bobby Newmark,** *aspiring punk console cowboy, is seconds from death, having attempted to breach the defenses of a data base that proves to be armed with black ice (ICE—Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics), lethal neural feedback programs. As the black ice closes around his central nervous system, Bobby is overwhelmed by a sense of some other agency or entity, some vast thing leaning in to touch him from the edges of the cyberspace matrix. Flashes of a girl's eyes, and a strangely innocent voice:* "WHY ARE THEY DOING THAT TO YOU?" *The entity seems to somehow free him from the ice; he pitches forward, the fall tearing the cyberspace deck's dermatrodes from his forehead, and lapses into unconsciousness.*

Turner and Conroy have arrived on board a derelict oil rig in international waters, Hosaka's temporary headquarters for the mercenaries and technicians involved in the Mitchell defection. Turner inspects the installation, challenges Conroy at gunpoint in order to reestablish the usual nature of their relationship, and accesses Mitchell's biosoft dossierchip. The dossier, compiled by Hosaka security, contains Mitchell's bi-

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ography, augmented by recorded fragments of the scientist's own memories.

Bobby, aka **Count Zero** *(his cowboy handle) wakes to discover that his cyberspace deck is still on, enabling the operators of his would-be target data base to locate the address of his mother's condo. He flees the condo in search of* **Two-a-Day,** *the black software dealer who rented him the penetration program he'd attempted to use. He doesn't find Two-a-Day, but soon learns of the bombing of the condo. Meanwhile, in Paris, Marly explains her new job to* **Andrea,** *her friend and roommate, and learns that Alain, her ex-lover, has been attempting to contact her.*

Conroy takes Turner to an abandoned pre-war shopping mall in the Arizona desert, near the Sonora line. Mitchell will arrange his own exit from the heavily fortified Maas Biolabs arcology north of the mall, but Turner must insure his safe passage to Hosaka's compound in Mexico City. Turner opts to transport the defecting scientist in a jump jet, and Conroy returns to California to obtain the jet. At the mall, Turner meets the point team, three other mercenaries hired by Conroy to secure the site of Mitchell's arrival: **Sutcliffe, Lynch,** *and* **Webber.** *Turner guesses that Lynch is a plant of Conroy's. Lynch shows him a self-contained, portable neurosurgery, complete with surgeons, specially constructed by Hosaka to assure that Mitchell hasn't been boobytrapped by Maas Biolabs.*

Bobby wakes again, this time while undergoing minor surgery in the Projects, a massive mincome arcology that overlooks Barrytown. He's been jumped and slashed by **Lobes,** *members of one of Barrytown's rigidly codified youth cults, and brought to the Project by* **Jackie** *and* **Rhea,** *black girls he assumes are associated with Two-a-Day. They escort him to Two-a-Day's "apartment," an entire floor of the Projects devoted to arcane agriculture. He meets* **Beauvoir** *and* **Lucas,** *black men who seem to be Two-a-Day's superiors in some hierarchy that Bobby doesn't understand. Beauvoir tells Bobby that Bobby must be* **"chosen of Legba,"** *because he has met* **"Vyèj Mirak, Our Lady, Virgin of Miracles,"** *in the cyberspace matrix.*

In Paris, Marly meets with Alain in a brasserie in the Louvre's Napoleon Court complex. He excuses the forgery that ruined Marly's career as an attempt to make money for the both of them, then shows her a hologram of the mysterious box she knows from Virek's construct of the Spanish park. He offers to exchange his information concerning the artist for a very large sum of her new employer's money. When Alain excuses himself, leaving their table momentarily, the waiter reveals himself as an agent of Virek, warns her that Alain is armed, and advises her to give him whatever he asks for.

In Arizona, Turner checks the preparations for Mitchell's defection, and has a disturbing encounter with a Korean neurosurgeon, an outlaw medic

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from one of Chiba City's notorious black clinics, who suggests that Mitchell may have been surgically implanted with the biochips developed in his lab—a radical procedure in terms of existing technology.

In the Projects, Beauvoir attempts to explain the worldview of Haitian voodoo to Bobby in terms of the cyberspace matrix. In the process, he explains that Two-a-Day is in the hire of "Sorcerers . . . Bad dudes, big money," who have charged him with testing a powerful piece of new software—of unknown origin. Two-a-Day, in turn, has rented the program in question to an unsuspecting Bobby, and deliberately sent him up against black ice. It is now obvious that Beauvoir and Lucas are themselves the "bad dudes" in question. They replay Bobby's mysterious cyberspace encounter in a holographic projection tank, and Beauvoir announces that they intend to take him to the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis.

Turner, making final preparations for Mitchell's defection, is haunted by the scientist's biosoft-embedded memories, as well as his own memories of an earlier—and disastrous—job in Mexico. As Turner and the team move the Hosaka surgery into position and prepare for Mitchell's arrival, Lynch refuses a direct order; Turner, convinced that Lynch is Conroy's spy, kills him. Webber announces that she *is Conroy's personal agent. As the jump jet and Mitchell's tiny ultralight plane arrive, the mall is abruptly lit by flares and Turner hears the rattle of automatic weapons. The ultralight crashes in the confusion, and Webber, acting on Conroy's orders, destroys the surgery and its surgeons with an anti-tank rocket. Turner, having discovered that the ultralight's pilot is a young girl—definitely not Mitchell—stumbles with her toward the waiting jet as Webber executes her second order, the destruction of the site's elaborate communications equipment.* **Ramirez,** *the site console man, dies in the second explosion. Turner and the girl escape as the sky above the mall whites out in what Turner assumes is a nuclear explosion, but the plane's computer informs him that it has detected no characteristic electromagnetic pulse. He orders the plane to change course.*

Marly and **Paco,** *Virek's agent, visit a Paris gallery which had exhibited and sold one of the mysterious collages, but Marly learns that nothing is known of the thing's true origins. Alain phones Marly, as previously agreed, and, as Paco had predicted, doubles his price. Bobby, meanwhile, has been taken by Lucas to New York in a computer-driven Rolls. They visit the* **Finn,** *whose dilapidated storefront conceals a thriving and long-established trade in stolen software. The Finn was the source of the ice-breaker program Two-A-Day had rented to Bobby; he shows them the corpses of three ninja assassins who've recently attempted his murder. He complains to Lucas about a new generation of console jockeys who no longer rely entirely on skill and souped-up technology, but "make deals*

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with things." Pressed for the source of the icebreaker, he tells them the story of the **Wig,** *a guilt-maddened jockey who became obsessed with the notion that God can be accessed via the cyberspace matrix. The Wig lives in orbit and sometimes provides the Finn with software, as well as strange, boxlike sculptures. . . .*

Turner orders the jump jet east, where it lands near his rural childhood home. The girl is Mitchell's daughter. Turner also learns that the plane had been programmed to land in Bogota, rather than Mexico City. Turner's brother, **Rudy,** *a brilliant but alcoholic jack-of-all-trades, scans* **Angela Mitchell** *for implants and finds a mysterious growth in her head. "Not an implant. Graft." Later, Angie lapses into a trance state and speaks in a language that Rudy's girlfriend,* **Sally,** *thinks may be French. Turner admits to Rudy that the girl has escaped from Maas. Turner and the girl depart for the Sprawl in Rudy's war surplus hovercraft. . . .*

Marly, disturbed by her sense of the enormity of Virek's network of spies and agents, insists on personally delivering the money Alain has demanded. She arrives at a highrise in a grim suburb of Paris and discovers Alain's body; he has been murdered. Paco arrives, but not before Marly has discovered the information Alain had intended to exchange for Virek's money. She conceals this from Paco. Horrified by Alain's death and by the responsibility she feels, Marly pockets a part of the payment money and later buys a ticket on a JAL shuttle, a ticket that will take her to the orbital coordinates Alain had scrawled on an empty cigarette pack.

Lucas deposits Bobby in Hypermart, a vast old Madison Avenue department store converted to multi-level bazaar, a crowded warren of tiny stalls. Jackie leads him into the maze, to **Jammer's** *club. Jammer, the owner, a retired console cowboy, agrees to conceal Bobby as payment for a "favor" he owes Beauvoir and Lucas.*

Turner and Angie head for the Sprawl, following the old highway system. As the girl begins to relax with him, she tells Turner about her "dreams," altered states she knows are the result of the thing her father has surgically implanted in her brain. There are others there, when the dreams come, "The bright ones. Not people . . ."

22
JAMMER'S

Jammer's was up twelve more flights of dead escalator and occupied the rear third of the top floor. Aside from Leon's place, Bobby had never seen a nightclub, and he found Jammer's both impressive and scary. Impressive because of its scale and what he took to be the exceptional quality of the fittings, and scary because a nightclub, by day, is somehow

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innately unreal. Witchy. He peered around, thumbs snagged in the back pockets of his new jeans, while Jackie conducted a whispered conversation with a long-faced white man in rumpled blue coveralls. The place was fitted out with dark ultrasuede banquettes, round black tables, and dozens of ornate screens of pierced wood. The ceiling was painted black, each table faintly illuminated by its own little recessed flood aimed straight down out of the dark. There was a central stage, brightly lit now with worklights strung on yellow flex, and, in the middle of the stage, a set of cherry red acoustic drums. He wasn't sure why, but it gave him the creeps; some sidelong sense of a half-life, as though something was about to shift, just at the edge of his vision. . . .

"Bobby," Jackie said, "come over here and meet Jammer."

He crossed the stretch of plain dark carpet with all the cool he could muster and faced the long-faced man, who had dark, thinning hair and wore a white evening shirt under his coverall. The man's eyes were narrow, the hollows of his cheeks shadowed with a day's growth of beard.

"Well," the man said, "you want to be a cowboy?" He was looking at Bobby's T-shirt and Bobby had the uncomfortable feeling that he might be about to laugh.

"Jammer was a jockey," Jackie said. "Hot as they come. Weren't you, Jammer?"

"So they say," Jammer said, still looking at Bobby. "Long time ago, Jackie. How many hours you logged, running?" he asked Bobby.

Bobby's face went hot. "Well, one, I guess."

Jammer raised his bushy eyebrows. "Gotta start somewhere." He smiled, his teeth small and unnaturally even and, Bobby thought, too numerous.

"Bobby," Jackie said, "why don't you ask Jammer about this Wig character the Finn was telling you about?"

Jammer glanced at her, then back to Bobby. "You know the Finn? For a hotdogger you're in pretty deep, aren't you?" He took a blue plastic inhaler from his hip pocket and inserted it in his left nostril, snorted, then put it back in his pocket. "Ludgate. The Wig. Finn's talking about the Wig? Must be in his dotage." Bobby didn't know what that meant, but it didn't seem like the time to ask.

"Well," Bobby ventured, "this Wig's up in orbit somewhere, and he sells the Finn stuff, sometimes. . . ."

"Really? Well, you coulda fooled me. I woulda told you the Wig was either dead or drooling. Crazier than your usual cowboy, you know what I mean? Batshit. Gone. Haven't heard of him in years."

"Jammer," Jackie said, "I think it's maybe best if Bobby just tells you the story. Beauvoir's due here this afternoon, and he'll have some questions for you, so you better know where things stand. . . ."

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Jammer looked at her. "Well. I see. Mr. Beauvoir's calling in that favor, is he?"

"Can't speak for him," she said, "but that would be my guess. We need a safe place to store the Count here."

"What Count?"

"Me," Bobby said, "that's me."

"Great," Jammer said, with a total lack of enthusiasm. "So come on back into the office."

Bobby couldn't keep his eyes off the cyberspace deck that took up a third of the surface of Jammer's antique oak desk. It was matte black, a custom job, no trademarks anywhere. He kept craning forward, while he told Jammer about Two-a-Day and his attempted run, about the girl-feeling thing and his mother getting blown up. It was the hottest looking deck he'd ever seen, and he remembered Jackie saying that Jammer had been such a hot cowboy in his day.

Jammer slumped back in his chair when Bobby was finished. "You wanna try it?" he asked. He sounded tired.

"Try it?"

"The deck. I think you might wanna try it. It's something about the way you keep rubbing your ass on the chair. Either you wanna try it or you gotta piss bad."

"Shit yeah. I mean, yeah, thanks, yeah, I would . . ."

"Why not? No way for anybody to know it's you and not me, right? Why don't you jack in with him, Jackie? Kinda keep track." He opened a desk drawer and took out two trode-sets. "But don't *do* anything, right? I mean, just buzz on out and spin. Don't try to run any numbers. I owe Beauvoir and Lucas a favor, and it looks like how I'm paying it back is by helping keep you intact. . . ." He handed one set of trodes to Jackie, the other to Bobby. He stood up, grabbed handles on either side of the black console, and spun it around so it faced Bobby. "Go on. You'll cream your jeans. Thing's ten years old and it'll still wipe ass on most anything. Guy name of Automatic Jack built it straight up from scratch. He was Bobby Quine's hardware artist, once. The two of 'em burnt the Blue Lights together, but that was probably before you were born. . . ."

Bobby already had his trodes on. Now he looked at Jackie.

"You ever jack tandem before?"

He shook his head.

"Okay. We'll jack, but I'll hang off your left shoulder. I say jack out, jack out. You see anything funny, it'll be because I'm with you, understand?"

He nodded.

She undid a pair of long, silver-headed pins at the rear of her fedora

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and took it off, putting it down on the desk beside Jammer's deck. She slid the trodes on over the orange silk headscarf and smoothed the contacts against her forehead.

"Let's go," she said.

Now and ever was, fast forward, Jammer's deck jacked up so high above the neon hotcores, a topography of data he didn't know. Big stuff, mountain-high, sharp and corporate in the non-place that was cyberspace. "Slow it down, Bobby." Jackie's voice low and sweet, beside him in the void.

"Jesus Christ, this thing's slick!"

"Yeah, but damp it down. The rush isn't any good for us. You want to cruise. Keep us up here and slow it down. . . ."

He eased off on forward until they seemed to coast along. He turned to the left, expecting to see her there, but there was nothing.

"I'm here," she said, "don't worry. . . ."

"Who was Quine?"

"Quine? Some cowboy Jammer knew. He knew 'em all, in his day."

He took a right-angle left at random, pivoting smoothly at the grid-intersection, testing the deck for response. It was amazing, totally unlike anything he'd felt before in cyberspace. "Holy shit. This thing makes an Ono-Sendai look like a kid's toy. . . ."

"It's probably got O-S circuitry in it. That's what they used to use, Jammer says. Take us up a little more. . . ."

They rose effortlessly through the grid, the data receding below them. "There isn't a hell of a lot to see up here," he complained.

"Wrong. You see some interesting stuff, you hang out long enough in the blank parts. . . ."

The fabric of the matrix seemed to shiver, directly in front of them. . . .

"Unh, Jackie . . ."

"Stop here. Hold it. It's okay. Trust me."

Somewhere, far away, his hands moving over the unfamiliar keyboard configuration. He held them steady now, while a section of cyberspace blurred, grew milky. . . . "What is—"

"Danbala ap monte," the voice said, harsh in his head, and in his mouth a taste like blood. *Danbala is riding her.* He knew, somehow, what the words meant, but the voice was iron in his head. The milky fabric divided, seemed to bubble, became two patches of shifting gray.

"Legba," she said. "Legba and Ougou Feray, god of war. Papa Ougou! St. Jacques Majeur! Viv la Vyèj!"

Iron laughter filled the matrix, sawing through Bobby's head.

"Map kite tout mizē ak tout giyon," said another voice, fluid and quicksilver and cold. "See, Papa, she has come here to throw away her bad

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luck!" And then that one laughed as well, and Bobby fought down a wave of sheer hysteria as the silver laughter rose through him like bubbles.

"Has she bad luck, the horse of Danbala?" boomed the iron voice of Ougou Feray, and for an instant Bobby thought he saw a figure flicker in the gray fog. The voice hooted its terrible laughter. "Indeed! Indeed! But she knows it not! She is not *my* horse, no, else I would cure her luck!" Bobby wanted to cry, to die, anything to escape the voices, the utterly impossible *wind* that had started to blow out of the gray warps, a hot damp wind that smelled of things he couldn't identify. "And she calls praise on the Virgin! Hear me, little sister! La Vyèj draws close indeed!"

"Yes," said the other, "she moves through *my* province now, I who rule the roads, the highways."

"But I, Ougou Feray, tell you that your enemies draw near as well! To the gates, sister, and beware!"

And then the gray areas faded, dwindled, shrank. . . .

"Jack us out," she said, her voice small and distant. And then she said: "Lucas is dead."

Jammer took a bottle of scotch from his desk drawer and carefully poured six centimeters of the stuff into a plastic highball glass. "You look like shit," he said to Jackie, and Bobby was startled by the gentleness in the man's voice. They'd been jacked out for at least ten minutes and nobody had said anything at all. Jackie looked crushed, and kept gnawing at her lower lip. Jammer looked either unhappy or angry, Bobby wasn't sure.

"How come you said Lucas was dead?" Bobby ventured, because it seemed to him that the silence was silting up in Jammer's cramped office like something that could choke you.

Jackie looked at him but didn't seem to focus. "They wouldn't come to me like that if Lucas were alive," she said. "There are pacts, agreements. Legba is always invoked first, but he should have come with Danbala. His personality depends on the loa he manifests with . . . Lucas must be dead. . . ."

Jammer pushed the glass of whiskey across the desk, but Jackie shook her head, the trode-set still riding her forehead, chrome and black nylon. He made a disgusted face, pulled the glass back and downed it himself. "What a load of shit. Things made a lot more sense before you people started screwing around with them."

"We didn't bring them here, Jammer," she said. "They were just *there,* and they found us because we understood them!"

"Same load of shit," Jammer said, wearily. "Whatever they are, wherever they came from, they just shaped themselves to what a bunch of crazed spades wanted to see. You follow me? There's no way in hell

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there'd be anything out there that you had to talk to in Haitian! You and your voodoo cult, they just saw that and they saw a set-up, and Beauvoir and Lucas and the rest, they're businessmen first. And those Goddamn things know how to make *deals*! It's a natural!" He tightened the cap on his bottle and put it back in the drawer. "You know, hon, it could just be that somebody very big, with a lot of muscle on the grid, is just taking you for a ride. Projecting those things, all that shit . . . And you *know* it's possible, don't you? Don't you, Jackie?"

"No way," Jackie said, her voice cold and even. "But how I know that's not anything I can explain. . . ."

Jammer took a black slab of plastic from his pocket and began to shave. "Sure," he said. The razor hummed as he worked on the line of his jaw. "I *lived* in cyberspace for eight years, right? Well, I know there wasn't anything out there, not then. . . . Anyway, you want me to phone Lucas, set your mind at ease one way or the other? You got the phone number for that Rolls of his?"

"No," Jackie said, "don't bother. Best we lay low 'til Beauvoir turns up." She stood, pulling off the trodes and picking up her hat. "I'm going to lie down, try to sleep. You keep an eye on Bobby. . . ." She turned and walked to the office door. She looked as though she were sleepwalking, all the energy gone out of her.

"Wonderful," Jammer said, running the shaver along his upper lip. "You want a drink?" he asked Bobby.

"Well," Bobby said, "it's kind of early. . . ."

"For you, maybe." He put the razor back in his pocket. The door closed behind Jackie. Jammer leaned forward slightly. "What did they look like, kid? You get a make?"

"Just kind of grayish. Fuzzy . . ."

Jammer looked disappointed. He slouched back in his chair again. "I don't think you can get a good look at 'em unless you're part of it." He drummed his fingers on the chair-arm. "You think they're for real?"

"Well, I wouldn't wanna try messing one around. . . ."

Jammer looked at him. "No? Well, maybe you're smarter than you look, there. I wouldn't wanna try messing one around myself. I got out of the game before they started turning up. . . ."

"So what do you think they are?"

"Ah. Still getting smarter . . . Well, I don't know. Like I said, I don't think I can swallow them being a bunch of Haitian voodoo gods, but who knows?" He narrowed his eyes. "Could be, they're virus programs that have gotten loose in the matrix and replicated, and gotten really smart. . . . That's scary enough, maybe the Turing people want it kept quiet. Or maybe the AI's have found a way to split parts of themselves off into the matrix, which would drive the Turings crazy. I knew this

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Tibetan guy did hardware mod for jockeys, he said they were tulpas." Bobby blinked. "A tulpa's a thought-form, kind of. Superstition. Really heavy people can split off a kind of ghost, made of negative energy." He shrugged. "More horseshit. Like Jackie's voodoo guys."

"Well, it looks to me like Lucas and Beauvoir and the others, they sure as hell *play* it like it was all real, and not just like it was an act. . . ."

Jammer nodded. "You got it. And they been doing damn well for themselves by it, too, so there's something there. . . ." He shrugged and yawned. "I gotta sleep too. You can do whatever you want, as long as you keep your hands off my deck. And don't try to go outside or ten kinds of alarm'll start screaming. There's juice and cheese and stuff in the fridge behind the bar. . . ."

Bobby decided that the place was still scary, now that he had it to himself, but that it was interesting enough to make the scariness worthwhile. He wandered up and down behind the bar, touching the handles of the beer taps and the chrome drink-nozzles. There was a machine that made ice, and another one that dispensed boiling water. He made himself a cup of Japanese instant coffee and sorted through Jammer's file of audio cassettes. He'd never heard of any of the bands or artists. He wondered whether that meant that Jammer, who was old, liked old stuff, or if this was all really new stuff that wouldn't filter out to Barrytown, probably by way of Leon's, for another two weeks. . . . He found a gun under the black and silver universal credit console at the end of the bar, a kind of fat little machine gun with a magazine that stuck straight down out of the handle. It was stuck under the bar with a strip of lime green velcro and he didn't think it was a good idea to touch it. After a while, he didn't feel frightened any more, just kind of bored and edgy. He took his cooling coffee and walked out into the middle of the seating area. He sat at one of the tables and pretended he was Count Zero, top console artist in the Sprawl, waiting for some dudes to show and talk about a deal, some run they needed done and nobody but the Count was even remotely up for it. "Sure," he said, to the empty nightclub, his eyes hooded, "I'll cut it for you . . . *If* you got the money. . . ." They paled when he named his price.

The place was soundproofed; you couldn't hear the bustle of the fourteenth floor's stalls at all, only the hum of some kind of air conditioner and the occasional gurgles of the hot water machine. Tired of the Count's power plays, Bobby left the coffee cup on the table and crossed to the entrance-way, running his hand along an old stuffed velvet rope that was slung between polished brass poles. Careful not to touch the glass door themselves, he settled himself on a cheap steel stool with a tape-patched leatherette top, beside the coat-check window. A dim bulb burned

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in the coat room; you could see a couple of dozen old wooden hangers dangling from steel rods, each one hung with a round yellow hand-numbered tag. He guessed Jammer sat here sometimes to check out the clientele. He didn't really see why anybody who'd been such a hot cowboy for eight years would want to run a nightclub, but maybe it was sort of a hobby. . . . He guessed you could get a lot of girls, running a nightclub, but he'd assumed you could get a lot anyway, if you were rich. And if Jammer had been a top jock for eight years, Bobby figured he had to be rich. . . .

He thought about the scene in the matrix, the gray patches and the voices. He shivered. He still didn't see why it meant Lucas was dead. How could Lucas be dead? Then he remembered that his mother was dead, and somehow that didn't seem too real either. Jesus. It all got on his nerves. He wished he were outside, on the other side of the doors, checking out the stalls and the shoppers and the people who worked there. . . .

He reached out and drew the velour curtain aside, just wide enough to peer out through the thick old glass, taking in the rainbow jumble of stalls and the characteristic grazing gait of the shoppers. And framed for him, square in the middle of it all, beside a table jammed with surplus analog VOM's, logic probes, and power conditioners, was the raceless, bone-heavy face of Leon, and the deepset, hideous eyes seemed to lock into Bobby's with an audible click of recognition. And then Leon did something Bobby couldn't remember ever having seen him do. He smiled.

23
CLOSER

The JAL steward offered her a choice of simstim cassettes: a tour of the Foxton retrospective at the Tate the previous August, a period adventure taped in Ghana *(Ashanti!),* highlights from Bizet's *Carmen* as viewed from a private box at the Tokyo Opera, or thirty minutes of Tally Isham's syndicated talk show *Top People.* "Your first shuttle flight, Ms. Ovski?" Marly nodded. She'd given Paleologos her mother's maiden name, which had probably been stupid. The steward smiled understandingly. "A cassette can definitely ease the lift-off. The *Carmen*'s very popular this week. Gorgeous costumes, I understand." She shook her head, in no mood for opera. She loathed Foxton, and would have preferred to feel the full force of acceleration rather than live through *Ashanti!* She took the Isham tape by default, as the least of four evils.

The steward checked her seat-harness, handed her the cassette and a little throwaway tiara in gray plastic, then moved on. She put the plastic

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trode-set on, jacked it into the seat-arm, sighed, and slotted the cassette in the opening beside the jack. The interior of the JAL shuttle vanished in a burst of Aegean blue, and she watched the words TALLY ISHAM'S TOP PEOPLE expand across the cloudless sky in elegant sans-serif capitals.

Tally Isham had been a constant in the stim industry for as long as Marly remembered, an ageless Golden Girl who'd come in on the first wave of the new medium. Now Marly found herself locked into Tally's tanned, lithe, tremendously *comfortable* sensorium. Tally Isham glowed, breathed deeply and easily, her elegant bones riding in the embrace of a musculature that seemed never to have known tension. Accessing her stim recordings was like falling into a bath of perfect health, feeling the spring in the star's high arches and the jut of her breasts against the silky white Egyptian cotton of her simple blouse. She was leaning against a pocked white balustrade above the tiny harbor of a Greek island town, a cascade of flowering trees falling away below her down a hillside built from whitewashed stone and narrow, twisting stairs. A boat sounded in the harbor.

"The tourists are hurrying back to their cruise ship now," Tally said, and smiled; when she smiled, Marly could feel the smoothness of the star's white teeth, taste the freshness of her mouth, and the stone of the balustrade was pleasantly rough against her bare forearms. "But one visitor to our island will be staying with us this afternoon, someone I've longed to meet, and I'm sure that you'll be delighted and surprised, as he's someone who ordinarily shuns major media coverage. . . ." She straightened, turned, and smiled into the tanned, smiling face of Josef Virek. . . .

Marly tore the set from her forehead and the white plastic of the JAL shuttle seemed to slam into place all around her. Warning signs were blinking on the console overhead, and she could feel a vibration that seemed to gradually rise in pitch. . . .

Virek? She looked at the trode-set. "Well," she said, "I suppose you *are* a top person. . . ."

"I beg your pardon?" The Japanese student beside her bobbed in his harness in a strange little approximation of a bow. "You are in some difficulty with your stim?"

"No, no," she said. "Excuse me." She slid the set on again and the interior of the shuttle dissolved in a buzz of sensory static, a jarring melange of sensations that abruptly gave way to the calm grace of Tally Isham, who had taken Virek's cool, firm hand and was smiling into his soft blue eyes. Virek smiled back, his teeth very white. "Delighted to be here, Tally," he said, and Marly let herself sink into the reality of the tape, accepting Tally's recorded sensory input as her own. Stim was a

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medium she ordinarily avoided, something in her personality conflicting with the required degree of passivity.

Virek wore a soft white shirt, cotton duck trousers rolled to just below the knee, and very plain brown leather sandals, His hand still in hers, Tally returned to the balustrade. "I'm sure," she said, "that there are many things our audience—"

The sea was gone. An irregular plain covered in a green-black growth like lichen spread out to the horizon, broken by the silhouettes of the Neo-Gothic spires of Gaudí's Church of the Sagrada Familia. The edge of the world was lost in a low bright mist, and a sound like drowned bells tolled in across the plain. . . .

"You have an audience of one, today," Virek said, and loked at Tally Isham through his round, rimless glasses. "Hello, Marly."

Marly struggled to reach the trodes, but her arms were made of stone. G-force, the shuttle lifting off from its concrete pad. . . . He'd trapped her here. . . .

"I understand," said Tally, smiling, leaning back against the balustrade, her elbows on warm rough stone. "What a lovely idea. Your Marly, Herr Virek, must be a lucky girl indeed. . . ." And it came to her, to Marly, that this wasn't Sense/Net's Tally Isham, but a part of Virek's construct, a programmed point of view worked up from years of *Top People,* and that now there was no choice, no way out, except to accept it, to listen, to give Virek her attention. The fact of his having caught her here, pinned her here this way, told her that her intuition had been correct: the machine, the structure, was there, was real. Virek's money was a sort of universal solvent, dissolving barriers to his will. . . .

"I'm sorry," he said, "to learn that you are upset. Paco tells me that you are fleeing from us, but I prefer to see it as the drive of an artist toward her goal. You have sensed, I think, something of the nature of my gestalt, and it has frightened you. As well it should. This cassette was prepared an hour before your shuttle was scheduled to lift off from Orly. We know your destination, of course, but I have no intention of following you. You are doing your job, Marly. I only regret that we were unable to prevent the death of your friend Alain, but we now know the identity of his killers and their employers. . . ."

Tally Isham's eyes were Marly's eyes now, and they were locked with Virek's, a blue energy burning there.

"Alain was murdered by the hired agents of Maas Biolabs," he continued, "and it was Maas who provided him with the coordinates of your current destination, Maas who gave him the hologram you saw. My relationship with Maas Biolabs has been ambivalent, to say the least. Two years ago, a subsidiary of mine attempted to buy them out. The sum involved would have affected the entire global economy. They refused.

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Paco has determined that Alain died because they discovered that he was attempting to market the information they had provided, market it to third parties. . . ." He frowned. "Exceedingly foolish, because he was utterly ignorant of the nature of the product he was offering. . . ."

How like Alain, she thought, and felt a wave of pity. Seeing him curled there on the hideous carpet, his spine outlined beneath the green fabric of his jacket. . . .

"You should know, I think, that my search for our boxmaker involves more than art, Marly." He removed his glasses and polished them in a fold of his white shirt; she found something obscene in the calculated humanity of the gesture. "I have reason to believe that the maker of these artifacts is in some position to offer me freedom, Marly. I am not a well man." He replaced the glasses, settling the fine gold ear-pieces carefully. "When I last requested a remote visual of the vat I inhabit in Stockholm, I was shown a thing like three truck trailers, lashed in a dripping net of support lines. . . . If I were able to leave that, Marly, or rather, to leave the riot of cells it contains . . . well," and he smiled his famous smile again, "what wouldn't I pay?"

And Tally-Marly's eyes swung to take in the expanse of dark lichen and the distant towers of the misplaced cathedral. . . .

"You lost consciousness," the steward was saying, his fingers moving across her neck. "It isn't uncommon, and our onboard medical computers tell us you're in excellent health. However, we've applied a dermadisk to counteract the adaptation syndrome you might experience prior to docking. . . ." His hand left her neck.

"Europe After the Rains," she said, "Max Ernst. The lichen . . ."

The man stared down at her, his face alert now and expressing professional concern. "Excuse me? Could you repeat that?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "a dream. . . . Are we there yet, at the terminal?"

"Another hour," he said.

Japan Air's orbital terminus was a white toroid studded with domes and ringed with the dark-rimmed oval openings of docking bays. The terminal above Marly's g-web—though *above* had temporarily lost its usual meaning—displayed an exquisitely drafted animation of the torus in rotation, while a series of voices—in seven languages—announced that the passengers on board JAL's Shuttle 580, Orly/Terminus I, would be taxied to the terminal at the earliest opportunity; JAL offered apologies for the delay, which was due to routine repairs underway in seven of the twelve bays. . . .

Marly cringed in her g-web, seeing the invisible hand of Virek in everything now. No, she thought, there must be a way. I want out of it,

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she told herself, I want a few hours as a free agent, and then I'll be done with him. . . . Goodbye, Herr Virek, I return to the land of the living, as poor Alain never will, Alain who died because I took your job. She blinked her eyes when the first tear came, then stared wide-eyed as a child at the minute floating spherelet the tear had become. . . .

And Maas, she wondered, who were they? Virek claimed that they had murdered Alain, that Alain had been working for them. She had vague recollections of stories in the media, something to do with the newest generation of computers, some ominous-sounding process in which immortal hybrid cancers spewed out tailored molecules that became units of circuitry. She remembered, now, that Paco had said that the screen of his modular telephone was a Maas product. . . .

The interior of the JAL toroid was so bland, so unremarkable, so utterly like any crowded airport, that she felt like laughing. There was the same scent of perfume, human tension, and heavily conditioned air, and the same background hum of conversation. The point-eight gravity would have made it easier to carry a suitcase, but she only had her black purse. Now she took her tickets from one of its zippered inner pockets and checked the number of her connecting shuttle against the columns of number arrayed on the nearest wallscreen.

Two hours to departure. Whatever Virek might say, she was sure that his machine was already busy, infiltrating the shuttle's crew or roster of passengers, the substitutions lubricated by a film of money. . . . There would be last minute illnesses, changes in plans, accidents. . . .

Slinging the purse over her shoulder, she marched off across the concave floor of white ceramic as though she actually knew where she was going, or had some sort of plan. But knowing, with each step she took, that she didn't.

Those soft blue eyes haunted her.

"Damn you," she said, and a jowly businessman in a dark Ginza suit sniffed and raised his newsfax, blocking her out of his world.

"So I told the bitch, see, you gotta get those opto-isolators *and* the breakout boxes out to *Sweet Jane* or I'll glue your ass to the bulkhead with gasket paste. . . ." Raucous female laughter and Marly glanced up from her sushi tray. The three women sat two empty tables away, their own table thick with beer cans and stacks of styrofoam trays smeared with brown soya sauce. One of them belched loudly and took a long pull at her beer. "So how'd she take it, Rez?" This was somehow the cue for another, longer burst of laughter, and the woman who'd first attracted Marly's attention put her head down in her arms and laughed until her shoulders shook. Marly stared dully at the trio, wondering what they

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were. Now the laughter had subsided and the first woman sat up, wiping tears from her eyes. They were *all* quite drunk, Marly decided, young and loud and rough-looking. The first woman was slight and sharp-faced, with wide gray eyes above a thin straight nose. Her hair was some impossible shade of silver, clipped short like a schoolboy's, and she wore an oversized canvas vest or sleeveless jacket covered entirely in bulging pockets, studs, and rectangular strips of velcro. The garment hung open, revealing, from Marly's angle, a small round breast sheathed in what seemed to be a bra of fine pink and black mesh. The other two were older and heavier, the muscles of their bare arms defined sharply in the seemingly sourceless light of the terminal cafeteria. The first woman shrugged, her shoulders moving inside the big vest. "Not that she'll do it," she said. The second woman laughed again, but not as heartily, and consulted a chronometer riveted on a wide leather wristband. "Me for off," she said. "Gotta Zion run, then eight pods of algae for the Swedes." Then she shoved her chair back from the table, stood up, and Marly read the embroidered patch centered across the shoulders of her black leather vest.

O'GRADY—WAJIMA
THE EDITH S.
INTERORBITAL HAULING

Now the woman beside her stood, hitching up the waistband of her baggy jeans. "I tell you, Rez, you let that bitch short you on those breakouts, it'll be bad for your name."

"Excuse me," Marly said, fighting the quaver in her voice.

The woman in the black vest turned and stared at her. "Yeah?" The woman looked her up and down, unsmiling.

"I saw your vest, the name, *Edith S.*, that's a ship, a spaceship?"

"A *spaceship?*" The woman beside her raised thick eyebrows. "Oh yeah, honey, a whole mighty *spaceship!*"

"She's a tug," the woman in the black vest said, and turned to go.

"I want to hire you," Marly said.

"Hire me?" Now they were all staring at her, faces blank and unsmiling. "What's that mean?"

Marly fumbled deep in the black Brussels purse and came up with the half-sheaf of New Yen that Paleologos the travel agent had returned after taking his fee. "I'll give you this. . . ."

The girl with the short silver hair whistled softly. The women glanced at one another. The one in the black vest shrugged. "Jesus," she said. "Where you wanna go? Mars?"

Marly dug into her purse again and produced the folded blue paper from a pack of Gauloise. She handed it to the woman in the black vest,

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who unfolded it and read the orbital coordinates that Alain had written there in green feltpen.

"Well," the woman said, "it's a quick enough hop, for that kind of money, but O'Grady and I, we're due in Zion 2300GMT. Contract job. What about you, Rez?" She handed the paper to the seated girl, who read it, looked up at Marly, and asked: "When?"

"Now," Marly said, "right now."

The girl pushed up from the table, the legs of her chair clattering on the ceramic, her vest swinging open to reveal that what Marly had taken for the net of a red and black bra was a single tattooed rose that entirely covered her left breast. "You're on, sister, cash up."

"Means give her the money now," O'Grady said.

"I don't want anyone to know where we're going," Marly said.

The three women laughed.

"You come to the right girl," O'Grady said, and Rez grinned.

24
RUN STRAIGHT DOWN

The rain came on when he turned east again, making for the Sprawl's fringe burbs and the blasted belt-country of the industrial zones. It came down in a solid wall, blinding him until he found the switch for the wipers. Rudy hadn't kept the blades in shape, so he slowed, the turbine's whine lowering to a roar, and edged over the shoulder, the apron-bag nosing past shredded husks of truck tires.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't see. The wiper blades are rotten." Turner tapped the button for the lights and four tight beams stabbed out from either side of the hover's wedge of hood and lost themselves in the gray wall of the downpour. He shook his head.

"Why don't we stop?"

"We're too close to the Sprawl. They patrol all this. Copters. They'd scan the ID panel on the roof and see we've got Ohio plates and a weird chassis-configuration. They might want to check us out. We don't want that."

"What are you going to do?"

"Keep to the shoulder until I can turn off, then get us under some cover, if I can. . . ."

He held the hover steady and swung it around in place, the headlights flashing off the dayglo orange diagonals on an upright pole marking a service road. He made for the pole, the bulging lip of the apron-bag bobbling over a thick rectangular crash-guard of concrete. "This might

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do it," he said, as they slid past the pole. The service road was barely wide enough for them; branches and undergrowth scratched against the narrow side-windows, scraping along the hover's steel-plate flanks.

"Lights down there," Angie said, straining forward in her harness to peer through the rain. Turner made out a watery yellow glow and twin dark uprights. He laughed.

"Gas station," he said. "Left over from the old system, before they put the big road through. Somebody must live there. Too bad we don't run on gasoline. . . ." He eased the hover down the gravel slope; as he drew nearer, he saw that the yellow glow came from a pair of rectangular windows. He thought he saw a figure move, in one of them. "Country," he said. "These boys may not be too happy to see us." He reached into the parka and slid the Smith & Wesson from its nylon holster and put it on the seat between his thighs. When they were five meters from the rusting gas pumps, he sat the hover down in a broad puddle and killed the turbines. The rain was still pissing down in windblown sheets, and he saw a figure in a flapping khaki poncho duck out of the front door of the station. He slid the side window open ten centimeters and raised his voice above the rain: "Sorry t' bother you. We had to get off the road. Our wipers are thrashed. Didn't know you were down here. . . ." The man's hands, in the glow from the windows, were hidden beneath the plastic poncho, but it was obvious that he held something.

"Private property," the man said, his lean face streaked with rain.

"Couldn't stay on the road," Turner called. "Sorry to bother you. . . ."

The man opened his mouth, began to gesture with the thing he held beneath the poncho, and his head exploded. It almost seemed to Turner that it happened before the red line of light scythed down and touched him, pencil-thick beam swinging casually, as though someone were playing with a flashlight. A blossom of red, beaten down by the rain, as the figure went to its knees and tumbled forward, a wire-stocked Savage 410 sliding from beneath the poncho.

Turner hadn't been aware of moving, but he found that he'd stoked the turbines, swung the controls over to Angie, and clawed his way out of his harness. "I say go, run it through the station. . . ." Then he was up, yanking at the lever that opened the roof-hatch, the heavy revolver in his hand. The roar of the black Honda reached him as soon as the hatch slid back, a lowering shadow overhead, just visible through the driving rain. "Now!" He pulled the trigger before she could kick them forward and through the wall of the old station, the recoil jarring his elbow numb against the roof of the hover. The bullet exploded somewhere overhead with a gratifying crack; Angie floored the hover and they plunged through the woodframe structure, with barely enough time for Turner to get his head and shoulders back down through the hatch.

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Something in the house exploded, probably a propane cannister, and the hover skewed to the left. Angie swung them back around as they crashed out through the far wall. "Where?" she yelled, above the turbine.

As if in answer, the black Honda came corkscrewing down, twenty meters in front of them, and threw up a silver sheet of rain. Turner grabbed the controls and they slid forward, the hover blasting up ten-meter fantails of ground water; they took the little combat copter square in its polycarbon canopy, its alloy fuselage crumpling like paper under the impact. Turner backed off and went in again, faster. This time the broken copter slammed into the trunks of two wet gray pines, lay there like some kind of long-winged fly.

"What happened?" Angie said, her hands to her face. "What happened?"

Turner tore registration papers and dusty sunglasses from a compartment in the door beside him, found a flashlight, checked its batteries. "What happened?" Angie said again, like a recording, "what happened?" He scrambled back up through the hatch, the gun in one hand, the light in the other. The rain had slackened. He jumped down onto the hover's hood, and then over the bumpers and into ankle-deep puddles, splashing toward the bent black rotors of the Honda.

There was a reek of escaping jet-fuel. The polycarbon canopy had cracked like an egg. He aimed the Smith & Wesson and thumbed the xenon flash twice, two silent pops of merciless light showing him blood and twisted limbs through the shattered plastic. He waited, then used the flashlight. Two of them. He came closer, holding the flashlight well away from his body, an old habit. Nothing moved. The smell of escaping fuel grew even stronger. Then he was tugging at the bent hatch. It opened. They both wore image-amp goggles. The round blank eye of the laser stared straight up into the night, and he reached down to touch the matted sheepskin collar of the dead man's bomber jacket. The blood that covered the man's beard looked very dark, almost black in the flashlight's beam. It was Oakey. He swung the beam left and saw that the other man, the pilot, was Japanese. He swung the beam back and found a flat black flask beside Oakey's foot. He picked it up, stuffed it into one of the parka's pockets, and dashed back to the hover. In spite of the rain, orange flames were starting to lick up through the wreckage of the gas station. He scrambled up the hover's bumper, across the hood, up again, and down through the hatch. "What happened?" Angie said, as though he hadn't left. "What happened?"

He fell into his seat, not bothering with the harness, and revved the turbine. "That's a Hosaka helicopter," he said, swinging them around. "They must have been following us. They had a laser. They waited until we were off the highway. Didn't want to leave us out there for the cops

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to find. When we pulled in here, they decided to go for us, but they must have figured that that poor guy was with us. Or maybe they were just taking out a witness. . . ."

"His head," she said, her voice shaking, "his head . . ."

"That was the laser," Turner said, steering back up the service road. The rain was thinning, nearly gone. "Steam. The brain vaporizes and the skull blows. . . ."

Angie doubled over and threw up. Turner steered with one hand, Oakey's flask in the other. He pried the snap-fit lid open with his teeth and gulped back a mouthful of Oakey's Wild Turkey.

As they reached the shoulder of the highway, the Honda's fuel found the flames of the ruined station, and the twisted fireball showed Turner the mall again, the light of the parachute flares, the sky whiting out as the jet streaked for the Sonora border. . . .

Angie straightened up, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and began to shake.

"We've got to get out of here," he said, driving east again. She said nothing, and he glanced sideways to see her rigid and upright in her seat, her eyes showing white in the faint glow of the instruments, her face blank. He'd seen her that way in Rudy's bedroom, when Sally had called them in, and now that same flood of language, a soft fast rattle of something that might have been patois French. He had no recorder, no time, he had to drive. . . .

"Hang on," he said, as they accelerated, "You'll be okay. . . ." Sure she couldn't hear him at all. Her teeth were chattering; he could hear it above the turbine. Stop, he thought, long enough to get something between her teeth, his wallet or a fold of cloth. Her hands were plucking spastically at the straps of the harness.

"There is a sick child in my house." The hover nearly left the pavement, when he heard the voice come from her mouth, deep and slow and weirdly glutinous. "I hear the dice being tossed, for her bloody dress. Many are the hands who dig her grave tonight, and yours as well. Enemies pray for your death, hired man. They pray until they sweat. Their prayers are a river of fever." And then a sort of croaking that might have been laughter. Turner risked a glance, saw a silver thread of drool descend from her rigid lips. The deep muscles of her face had contorted into a mask he didn't know.

"Who are you?"

"I am the Lord of Roads."

"What do you want?"

"This child for my horse, that she may move among the towns of men. It is well that you drive east. Carry her to your city. I shall ride her again. And Samedi rides with you, gunman. He is the wind you hold in

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your hands, but he is fickle, the Lord of Graveyards, no matter that you have served him well. . . ." He turned in time to see her slump sideways in the harness, her head lolling, mouth slack.

25
KASUAL/GOTHICK

"This is the Finn's phone program," said the speaker below the screen, "and the Finn, he's not here. You wanna download, you know the access code already. You wanna leave a message, leave it already." Bobby stared at the image on the screen and slowly shook his head. Most phone programs were equipped with cosmetic video sub-programs written to bring the video image of the owner into greater accordance with the more widespread paradigms of personal beauty, erasing blemishes and subtly molding facial outlines to meet idealized statistical norms. The effect of a cosmetic program on the Finn's grotesque features was definitely the weirdest thing Bobby had ever seen, as though somebody had gone after the face of a dead gopher with a full range of mortician's crayons and paraffin injections.

"That's not natural," said Jammer, sipping scotch.

Bobby nodded.

"Finn," Jammer said, "is agoraphobic. Gives him the hives to leave that impacted shitpile of a shop. And he's a phone junkie, can't *not* answer a call, if he's there. I'm starting to think the bitch is right, Lucas is dead and some heavy shit is going down. . . ."

"The bitch," Jackie said, from behind the bar, "*knows* already."

"She knows," Jammer said, putting the plastic glass down and fingering his bolo tie, "she *knows*. Talked to a hoodoo in the matrix, so she knows. . . ."

"Well, Lucas isn't answering, and Beauvoir isn't answering, so maybe she's right." Bobby reached out and shut off the phone as the record tone began to squeal.

Jammer was gotten up in a pleated shirt, white dinner jacket, and black trousers with satin stripes down the leg, and Bobby took this to be his working outfit for the club. "Nobody's here," he said now, looking from Bobby to Jackie. "Where's Bogue and Sharkey? Where's the waitresses?"

"Who's Bogue and Sharkey?" Bobby asked.

"The bartenders. I don't like this." He got up from his chair, walked to the door, and gently edged one of the curtains aside. "What the hell are those dipshits doing out there? Hey, Count, this looks like your speed. Get over here. . . ."

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Bobby got up, full of misgivings—he hadn't felt like telling Jackie or Jammer about letting Leon see him, because he didn't want to look like a wilson—and walked over to where the club owner stood.

"Go on. Take a peek. Don't let 'em see you. They're pretending so hard not to watch us, you can almost smell it."

Bobby moved the curtain, careful to keep the crack no more than a centimeter wide, and looked out. The shopping crowd seemed to have been replaced almost entirely by black-crested Gothick boys in leather and studs, and—amazingly—by an equal proportion of blond Kasuals, the latter decked out in the week's current Shinjuku cottons and gold-buckled white loafers. "I dunno," Bobby said, looking up at Jammer, "but they shouldn't be *together,* Kasuals and Gothicks, you know? They're like natural enemies, it's in the DNA or something. . . ." He took another look. "Goddamn, there's about a hundred of 'em."

Jammer stuck his hands deep in his pleated trousers. "You know any of those guys personally?"

"Gothicks, I know some of 'em to talk to. Except it's hard to tell 'em apart. Kasuals, they'll stomp anything that isn't Kasual. That's mainly what they're about. But I just been cut up by Lobes anyway, and Lobes are supposed to be under treaty with the Gothicks, so who knows?"

Jammer sighed. "So, I guess you don't feel like strolling out there and asking one what they think they're up to?"

"No," Bobby said, earnestly, "I don't."

"Hmmm." Jammer looked at Bobby in a calculating way, a way that Bobby definitely didn't like.

Something small and hard dropped from the high black ceiling and clicked loudly on one of the round black tables. The thing bounced and hit the carpet, rolling, and landed between the toes of Bobby's new boots. Automatically, he bent and picked it up. An old-fashioned, slot-headed machine screw, its threads brown with rust and its head clotted with dull black latex paint. He looked up as a second one struck the table, and caught a glimpse of an unnervingly agile Jammer vaulting the bar, beside the universal credit unit. Jammer vanished, there was a faint ripping sound—velcro—and Bobby knew that Jammer had the squat little automatic weapon he'd seen there earlier in the day. He looked around, but Jackie was nowhere in sight.

A third screw ticked explosively on the formica of the table top.

Bobby hesitated, confused, but then followed Jackie's example and got out of sight, moving as quietly as he could. He crouched behind one of the club's wooden screens and watched as the fourth screw came down, followed by a slender cascade of fine dark dust. There was a scraping sound, and then a square steel ceiling-grate vanished abruptly, withdrawn into some kind of duct. He glanced quickly to the bar, in time to

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see the fat recoil-compensator on the barrel of Jammer's gun as it swung up. . . .

A pair of thin brown legs dangled from the opening now, and a gray sharkskin hem, smudged with dust.

"Hold it," Bobby said, "it's Beauvoir!"

"You bet it's Beauvoir," came the voice from above, big and hollow with the echo of the duct. "Get that damn table out of the way." Bobby scrambled out from behind the screen and hauled the table and chairs to the side. "Catch this," Beauvoir said, and dangled a bulging olive-drab pack from one of its shoulder-straps, then let it go. The weight of the thing nearly took Bobby to the floor. "Now get out of my way. . . ." Beauvoir swung down out of the duct, hung from the opening's edge with both hands, then dropped.

"What happened to the screamer I had up there?" Jammer asked, standing up behind the bar, the little machine gun in his hands.

"Right here," Beauvoir said, tossing a dull gray bar of phenolic resin to the carpet. It was wrapped with a length of fine black wire. "No other way I could get in here without a regular army of shitballs knowing about it, as it happens. Somebody's obviously given them the blueprints to the place, but they've missed that one."

"How'd you get up to the roof?" Jackie asked, stepping from behind a screen.

"I didn't," Beauvoir said, pushing his big plastic frames back up his nose. "I shot a line of monomol across from the stack next door, then slid over on a ceramic spindle. . . ." His short nappy hair was full of furnace dust. He looked at her gravely. "You know," he said.

"Yes. Legba and Papa Ougou, in the matrix. I jacked with Bobby, on Jammer's deck. . . ."

"They blew Ahmed away on the Jersey freeway. Probably used the same launcher they did Bobby's old lady with. . . ."

"Who?"

"Still not sure," Beauvoir said, kneeling beside the pack and clicking open the quick-release plastic fasteners, "but it's starting to shape up. . . . What I was working on, up until I heard Lucas had been hit, was running down the Lobes who mugged Bobby for his deck. That was probably an accident, just business as usual, but somewhere there's a couple of Lobes with our icebreaker. . . . That had potential, for sure, because the Lobes are hotdoggers, some of them, and they do a little business with Two-A-Day. So Two-A-Day and I were making the rounds, looking to learn what we could. Which was useless, as it turned out, except that while we were with this dust case called Alix, who's second assistant warlord or something, he gets a call from his opposite number, who Two-A-Day pins as a Barrytown Gothick name of Raymond." He was unloading the pack as

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he spoke, laying out weapons, tools, ammunition, coils of wire. "Raymond wants to talk real bad, but Alix is too cool to do it in front of us. 'Sorry, gentlemen, but this is official warlord biz,' this dumbshit says, so, natch, we excuse our humble selves, shuffle and bow and all, and nip around the corner. Use Two-A-Day's modular phone to ring up our cowboys back in the Sprawl and put them on to Alix's phone, but fast. Those cowboys went into Alix's conversation with Raymond like a wire into cheese." He pulled a deformed twelve-gauge shotgun, barely longer than his forearm, from the pack, selected a fat drum-magazine from the display he'd made on the carpet, and clicked the two together. "You ever see one of these? South African, pre-war . . ." Something in his voice and the set of his jaw made Bobby suddenly aware of his contained fury. "Seems Raymond has been approached by this guy, and this guy has lots of money, and he wants to hire the Gothicks outright, the whole apparat, to go into the Sprawl and do a number, a real crowd scene. This guy wants it so big, he's gonna hire the Kasuals too. Well, the shit hit the fan, then, because Alix, he's kind of conservative. Only good Kasual's a dead one, and then only after *x* number of hours of torture, etc. 'Fuck that,' Raymond says, *ever the diplomat, 'we're talking big money here, we're talking corporate. . . .'* " He opened a box of fat red plastic shells and began to load the gun, cranking one after another into the magazine. "Now I could be way off, but I keep seeing these Maas Biolabs PR types on video lately. Something very weird's happened, out on some property of theirs in Arizona. Some people say it was a nuke, some people say it was something else. And now they're claiming their top biosoft man's dead, in what they call an unrelated accident. That's Mitchell, the guy who more or less invented the stuff. So far, nobody else is even pretending to be able to make a biochip, so Lucas and I assumed from the beginning that Maas had made that icebreaker. If it *was* an icebreaker . . . but we had no idea who the Finn got it from, or where *they* got it. But if you put all that together, it looks like Maas Biolabs might be out to cook us all. And this is where they plan to do it, because they got us here but good."

"I dunno," Jammer said, "we got a lot of friends in this building. . . ."

"Had." Beauvoir put the shotgun down and started loading a Nambu automatic. "Most of the people on this level and the next one down got bought out this afternoon. Cash. Duffles full of it. There's a few holdouts, but not enough."

"That doesn't make any sense," Jackie said, taking the glass of scotch from Jammer's hand and drinking it straight off. "What do we have that anybody could want that bad?"

"Hey," Bobby said, "don't forget, they probably don't know those Lobes ripped me for the icebreaker. Maybe that's all they want."

"No," Beauvoir said, snapping the magazine into the Nambu, "because

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they couldn't have known you hadn't stashed it in your mother's place, right?"

"But maybe they went there and looked. . . ."

"So how did they know Lucas wasn't carrying it in Ahmed?" Jammer said, walking back to the bar.

"Finn thought someone sent those three ninjas to kill him, too," Bobby said. "Said they had stuff to make him answer questions first, though. . . ."

"Maas again," Beauvoir said. "Whoever, here's the deal with the Kasuals and Gothicks. We'd know more, but Alix the Lobe got on his high horse and wouldn't parlay with Raymond. No co-employment with the hated Kasuals. Near as our cowboys could make out, the army's outside to keep you people in. And to keep people like *me* out. People with guns and stuff." He handed the loaded Nambu to Jackie. "You know how to use a gun?" he asked Bobby.

"Sure," Bobby lied.

"No," Jammer said, "we got enough trouble without arming *him*. Jesus Christ . . ."

"What all that suggests to me," Beauvoir said, "is that we can expect somebody else to come in after us. Somebody a little more professional. . . ."

"Unless they just blow Hypermart all to hell and gone," Jammer said, "and all those zombies with it. . . ."

"No," Bobby said, "or else they'd already have *done* it."

They all stared at him.

"Give the boy credit," Jackie said. "He's got it right."

Thirty minutes later and Jammer was staring glumly at Beauvoir. "I gotta hand it to you. That's the most half-assed plan I've heard in a long time."

"Yeah, Beauvoir," Bobby cut in, "why can't we just crawl back up that vent, sneak across the roof, and get over to the next building? Use the line you came over on."

"There's Kasuals on the roof like flies on shit," Beauvoir said. "Some of them might even have brain enough to have found the cap I opened to get down here. I left a couple of baby frag mines on my way in." He grinned mirthlessly. "Aside from that, the building next door is taller. I had to go up on that roof and shoot the monomol down to this one. You can't hand-over-hand up monomolecular filament; your fingers fall off."

"Then how the hell did you expect to get out?" Bobby said.

"Drop it, Bobby," Jackie said quietly. "Beauvoir's done what he had to do. Now he's in here with us, and we're armed."

"Bobby," Beauvoir said, "why don't you run the plan back to us, make sure we understand it. . . ."

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Bobby had the uncomfortable feeling that Beauvoir wanted to make sure he understood it, but he leaned back against the bar and began. "We get ourselves all armed up and we wait, okay? Jammer and I, we go out with his deck and scout around the matrix, maybe we get some idea what's happening. . . ."

"I think I can handle that by myself," Jammer said.

"Damn!" Bobby was off the bar. "Beauvoir *said!* I wanna go, I wanna jack! How am I ever supposed to *learn* anything?"

"Never mind, Bobby," Jackie said, "you go on."

"Okay," Bobby said, sulkily, "so, sooner or later, the guys who hired the Gothicks and Kasuals to keep us here, they're gonna come for us. When they do, we take 'em. We get at least one of 'em alive. Same time, we're on our way out, and the Goths 'n' all, they won't expect all the firepower, so we get to the street and head for the Projects. . . ."

"I think that about covers it," Jammer said, strolling across the carpet to the locked and curtained door. "I think that about sums it up." He pressed his thumb against a coded latchplate and pulled the door half open. "Hey, you!" he bellowed. "Not you! You with the hat! Get your ass over here. I want to talk—" The pencil-thick red beam pierced door and curtain, two of Jammer's fingers, and winked over the bar. A bottle exploded, its contents billowing out as steam and vaporized esters. Jammer let the door swing shut again, stared at his ruined hand, then sat down hard on the carpet. The club slowly filled with the Christmas-tree smell of boiled gin. Beauvoir took a silver pressure-bottle from the bar counter and hosed the smouldering curtain with seltzer, until the CO^2 cartridge was exhausted and the stream faltered. "You're in luck, Bobby," Beauvoir said, tossing the bottle over his shoulder, " 'cause brother Jammer, he ain't gonna be punching any deck. . . ."

Jackie was making clucking sounds over Jammer's hand, kneeling down. Bobby caught a glimpse of cauterized flesh, then quickly looked away.

26
THE WIG

"You know," Rez said, hanging upside down in front of Marly, "it's strictly no biz of mine, but is somebody maybe expecting you, when we get there? I mean, I'm taking you there, for sure, and if you can't get in, I'll take you back to JAL Term. But if nobody wants to let you in, I don't know how long I want to hang around. That thing's scrap, and we get some funny people hanging out in the hulks, out here. . . ." Rez—or

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Therèse, Marly gathered, from the laminated pilot's license clipped to the *Sweet Jane*'s console—had removed her canvas workvest for the trip.

Marly, numb with the rainbow of derms Rez had pasted along her wrist to counteract the convulsive nausea of space adaptation syndrome, stared at the rose tattoo. It had been executed in a Japanese style hundreds of years old, and Marly woozily decided that she liked it. That, in fact, she liked Rez, who was at once hard and girlish and concerned for her strange passenger. Rez had admired her leather jacket and purse, before bundling them into a kind of narrow nylon net hammock already stuffed with cassettes, print books, and unwashed clothing.

"I don't know," Marly managed, "I'll just have to try to get in. . . ."

"You know what that thing is, sister?" Rez was adjusting the g-web around Marly's shoulders and armpits.

"What thing?" Marly blinked.

"Where we're going. It's part of the old Tessier-Ashpool cores. Used to be the mainframes for their corporate memory. . . ."

"I've heard of them," Marly said, closing her eyes. "Andrea told me. . . ."

"Sure, everybody's heard of 'em, they used to own alla Freeside. Built it, even. Then they went tits up and sold out. Had their family place cut off the spindle and towed to another orbit, but they had the cores wiped before they did that, and torched 'em off and sold 'em to a scrapper. The scrapper's never done anything with 'em. I never heard anybody was squatting there, but out here you live where you can. . . . I guess that's true for anybody. Like they say that Lady 3Jane, old Ashpool's daughter, she's still living in their old place, stone crazy. . . ." She gave the g-web a last professional tug. "Okay. You just relax. I'm gonna burn *Jane* hard for twenty minutes, but it'll get us there fast, which I figure is what you're paying for. . . ."

And Marly slid back into a landscape built all of boxes, vast wooden Cornell constructions where the solid residues of love and memory were displayed behind rain-streaked sheets of dusty glass, and the figure of the mysterious Boxmaker fled before her down avenues paved with mosaics of human teeth, Marly's Paris boots clicking blindly over symbols outlined in dull gold crowns. The Boxmaker was male and wore Alain's green jacket, and feared her above all things. "I'm sorry," she cried, running after him, "I'm sorry. . . ."

"Yeah. Therèse Lorenz, the *Sweet Jane*. You want the numbers? What? Yeah, sure we're pirates. I'm Captain Hook already. . . . Look, Jack, lemme give you the numbers, you can check it out. . . . I said already. I gotta passenger. Request permission, et Goddamn cetera . . . Marly Something, speaks French in her sleep. . . ." Marly's lids flickered,

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opened. Rez was webbed in front of her, each small muscle of her back precisely defined. "Hey," Rez said, twisting around in the web, "I'm sorry. I raised 'em for you, but they sound pretty flakey. You religious?"

"No," Marly said, baffled.

Rez made a face. "Well, I hope you can make sense out of this shit, then." She shrugged out of the web and executed a tight backward somersault that brought her within centimeters of Marly's face. An optic ribbon trailed from her hand to the console, and for the first time Marly saw the delicate sky-blue socket set flush with the skin of the girl's wrist. She popped a speaker-bead into Marly's right ear and adjusted the transparent microphone-tube that curved down from it.

"You have no right to disturb us here," a man's voice said. "Our work is the work of God, and we alone have seen His true face!"

"Hello? Hello, can you hear me? My name is Marly Krushkhova and I have urgent business with you. Or with someone at these coordinates. My business concerns a series of boxes, collages. The maker of these boxes may be in terrible danger! I must see him!"

"Danger?" The man coughed. "God alone decides man's fate! We are entirely without fear. . . . But neither are we fools. . . ."

"Please, listen to me. I was hired by Josef Virek to locate the maker of the boxes. But now I have come to warn you. Virek knows you are here, and his agents will follow me. . . ." Rez was staring at her hard. "You must let me in! I can tell you more. . . ."

"Virek?" There was a long, static-filled pause. "Josef Virek?"

"Yes," Marly said. "That one. You've seen his picture all your life, the one with the King of England. . . . Please, please . . ."

"Give me your pilot," the voice said, and the bluster and hysteria were gone, replaced with something Marly liked even less.

"It's a spare," Rez said, snapping the mirrored helmet from the red suit. "I can afford it, you paid me enough. . . ."

"No," Marly protested, "really, you needn't . . ." I . . ." She shook her head. Rez was undoing the fastenings at the spacesuit's waist.

"You don't go into a thing like that without a suit," she said. "You don't know what they got for atmosphere. You don't even know they *got* atmosphere! And any kinda bacteria, spores . . . what's the matter?" Lowering the silver helmet.

"I'm claustrophobic!"

"Oh . . ." Rez stared at her. "I heard of that. . . . It means you're scared to be inside things?" She looked genuinely curious.

"Small things, yes . . ."

"Like *Sweet Jane*?"

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"Yes, but . . ." She glanced around at the cramped cabin, fighting her panic. "I can stand this, but not the helmet. . . ." She shuddered.

"Well," Rez said, "tell you what. We get you into the suit, but we leave the helmet off. I'll teach you how to fasten it. Deal? Otherwise, you don't leave my ship. . . ." Her mouth was straight and firm.

"Yes," Marly said, "yes . . ."

"Here's the drill," Rez said. "We're lock to lock. This hatch opens, you get in, I close it. Then I open the other side. Then you're in whatever passes for atmosphere, in there. You sure you don't want the helmet on?"

"No," Marly said, looking down at the helmet she grasped in the suit's red gauntlets, at her pale reflection in the mirrored faceplate.

Rez made a little clicking sound with her tongue. "Your life. If you want to get back, have them put a message through JAL Term for the *Sweet Jane*."

Marly kicked off clumsily and spun forward into the lock, no larger than an upright coffin. The red suit's breastplate clicked hard against the outer hatch, and she heard the inner one hiss shut behind her. A light came on, beside her head, and she thought of the lights in refrigerators. "Goodbye, Thèrese . . ."

Nothing happened. She was alone with the beating of her heart.

Then the *Sweet Jane*'s outer hatch slid open. A slight pressure differential was enough to tumble her out into a darkness that smelled old and sadly human, a smell like a long-abandoned locker room. There was a thickness, an unclean dampness to the air, and, still tumbling, she saw *Sweet Jane*'s hatch slide shut behind her. A beam of light stabbed past her, wavered, swung, and found her spinning.

"Lights," someone bawled hoarsely, "lights for our guest! Jones!" It was the voice she'd heard through the ear-bead. It rang strangely, in the iron vastness of this place, this hollow she fell through, and then there was a grating sound and a distant ring of harsh blue flared up, showing her the far curve of a wall or hull of steel and welded lunar rock. The surface was lined and pitted with precisely-carved channels and depressions, where equipment of some kind had once been fitted. Scabrous clumps of brown expansion-foam still adhered, in some of the deeper cuts, and others were lost in dead black shadow. . . . "You'd better get a line on her, Jones, before she cracks her head. . . ."

Something struck the shoulder of her suit with a damp smack, and she turned her head to see a pink gob of bright plastic trailing a fine pink line, which jerked taut as she watched, flipping her around. The derelict cathedral space filled with the laboring whine of an engine, and, quite slowly, they reeled her in.

"It took you long enough," the voice said. "I wondered who would be

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first, and now it's Virek . . . Mammon. . . ." And then they had her, spinning her around. She almost lost the helmet; it was drifting away, but one of them batted it back into her hands. Her purse, with her boots and jacket folded inside, executed its own arc, on its shoulder strap, and bumped the side of her head.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Ludgate!" the old man roared. "Wigan Ludgate, as you well know. . . . Who else did he send you to deceive?" His seamed, blotched face was cleanshaven, but his gray, untrimmed hair floated free, seaweed on a tide of stale air.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not here to deceive you. I no longer work for Virek. . . . I came here because . . . I mean, I'm not at all sure why I came here, to begin with, but on my way I learned that the artist who makes the boxes is in danger. Because there's something else, something Virek thinks he has, something Virek thinks will free him from his cancers. . . ." Her words ran down to silence, in the face of the almost palpable craziness that radiated from Wigan Ludgate, and she saw that he wore the cracked plastic carapace of an old worksuit, with cheap metal crucifixes epoxied like a necklace around the tarnished steel helmet-ring. His face was very close. She could smell his decaying teeth.

"The boxes!" Little balls of spittle curled off his lips, obeying the elegant laws of Newtonian physics. "You whore! They're of the hand of God!"

"Easy there, Lud," said a second voice, "you're scarin' the lady. Easy, lady, 'cause old Lud, he hasn't got too many visitors. Gets him quite worked up, y'see, but he's basically a harmless old bugger. . . ." She turned her head and met the relaxed gaze of a pair of wide blue eyes in a very young face. "I'm Jones," he said. "I live here too. . . ."

Wigan Ludgate threw back his head and howled, and the sound rang wild against the walls of steel and stone.

"Mostly, y'see," Jones was saying, as Marly pulled her way behind him along a knotted line stretched taut down a corridor that seemed to have no end, "he's pretty quiet. Listens to his voices, y'know. Talks to himself, or maybe to the voices, I dunno, and then a spell comes on him and he's like this. . . ." When he stopped speaking, she could still hear faint echoes of Ludgate's howls. "You may think it's cruel, me leavin' him this way, but it's best, really. He'll tire of it soon. Gets hungry. Then he comes to find me. Wants his tuck, y'see."

"Are you Australian?" she asked.

"New Melbourne," he said. "Or was, before I got up the well. . . ."

"Do you mind my asking why you're here? I mean, here in this, this . . . what is it?"

The boy laughed. "Mostly, I call it the Place. Lud, he calls it a lot of

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things, but mostly the Kingdom. Figures he's found God, he does. Suppose he has, if you want to look at it that way. Near as I make it, he was some kind of console crook, before he got up the well. Don't know how he came to be here, exactly, other than that it suits the poor bastard. . . . Me, I came here runnin', understand? Trouble somewhere, not to be too specific, and my arse for out of there. Turn up here—that's a long tale of its own—and here's bloody Ludgate near to starvin'. He'd had him a sort of business, sellin' things he'd scavenge, and those boxes you're after, but he'd gotten a bit far gone for that. His buyers would come, oh, say, three times a year, but he'd send 'em away. Well, I thought, the hidin' here's as good as any, so I took to helpin' him. That's it, I guess. . . ."

"Can you take me, take me to the artist? Is he here? It's extremely urgent. . . ."

"I'll take you, no fear. But this Place, it was never really built for people, not to get around in, I mean, so it's a bit of a journey. . . . It isn't likely to be going anywhere, though. Can't guarantee it'll make a box for you. Do you really work for Virek? Fabulous rich old shit on the telly? Kraut, isn't he?"

"I did," she said, "for a number of days. As for nationality, I would guess Herr Virek is the sole citizen of a nation consisting of Herr Virek. . . ."

"See what you mean," Jones said, cheerily. "It's all the same, with these rich old shits, I suppose, though it's more fun than watching a bloody zaibatsu. . . . You won't see a zaibatsu come to a messy end, will you? Take old Ashpool—countryman of mine, he was—who built all this; they say his own daughter slit his throat, and now she's bad as old Lud, holed up in the family castle somewhere. The Place being a former part of all that, y'see. . . ."

"Rez . . . I mean, my pilot, said something like that . . . and a friend of mine, in Paris, mentioned the Tessier-Ashpool's recently. . . . The clan is in eclipse?"

"Eclipse? Lord! Down the bloody tube's more like it. . . . Think about it: we're crawlin', you an' me, through what used to be their corporate data cores. Some contractor in Pakistan bought the thing; hull's fine, and there's a fair bit of gold in the circuitry, but not as cheap to recover as some might like. . . . It's been hangin' up here ever since, with only old Lud to keep it company, and it him. 'Til I come along, that is. Guess one day the crews'll come up from Pakistan and get cuttin'. . . . Funny, though, how much of it still seems to work, at least part of the time. Story I heard, one got me here in the first place, said T-A's wiped the cores dead, before they cut it loose. . . ."

"But you think they are still operative?"

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"Lord, yes. About the way Lud is, if you call that operative. What do you think your boxmaker is?"

"What do you know about Maas Biolabs?"

"Moss what?"

"Maas. They make biochips. . . ."

"Oh. Them. Well, that's all I do know about 'em. . . ."

"Ludgate speaks of them?"

"He might. Can't say as I listen all that close. Lud, he does speak a fair bit. . . ."

27
STATIONS OF THE BREATH

He brought them in through avenues lined with rusting slopes of dead vehicles, with wrecker's cranes and the black towers of smelters. He kept to the back streets, as they eased into the western flank of the Sprawl, and eventually gunned the hover down a brick canyon, armored sides scraping sparks, and drove it hard into a wall of soot-blown, compacted garbage. An avalanche of refuse slid down, almost covering the vehicle, and he released the controls, watching the foam dice swing back and forth, side to side. The kerosene gauge had been riding on empty for the last twelve blocks.

"What happened back there?" she said, her cheekbones green in the glow of the instruments.

"I shot down a helicopter. Mostly by accident. We were lucky."

"No, I mean after that. I was . . . I had a dream."

"What did you dream?"

"The big things, moving . . ."

"You had some kind of seizure."

"Am I sick? Do you think I'm sick? Why did the company want to kill me?"

"I don't think you're sick."

She undid her harness and scrambled back over the seat, to crouch where they had slept. "It was a bad dream. . . ." She began to tremble. He climbed out of his harness and went to her, held her head against him, stroking her hair, smoothing it back against the delicate skull, stroking it back behind her ears. Her face in the green glow like something hauled from dreams and abandoned, the skin smooth and thin across the bones. The black sweatshirt half unzipped, he traced the fragile line of her collarbone with a fingertip. Her skin was cool, moist with a film of sweat. She clung to him.

He closed his eyes and saw his body in a sun-striped bed, beneath a

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slow fan with blades of brown hardwood. His body pumping, jerking like an amputated limb, Allison's head thrown back, mouth open, lips taut across her teeth.

Angie pressed her face into the hollow of his neck.

She groaned, stiffened, rocked back. "Hired man," the voice said. And he was back against the driver's seat, the Smith & Wesson's barrel reflecting the single line of green instrument-glow, the luminous bead on its front sight eclipsing her left pupil.

"No," the voice said.

He lowered the gun. "You're back."

"No. Legba spoke to you. I am Samedi."

"Saturday?"

"Baron Saturday, hired man. You met me once on a hillside. The blood lay on you like dew. I drank of your full heart, that day." Her body jerked violently. "You know this town well. . . ."

"Yes." He watched as muscles tensed and relaxed in her face, molding her features into a new mask. . . .

"Very well. Leave the vehicle here, as you intended. But follow the stations north. To New York. Tonight. I will guide you with Legba's horse, then, and you will kill for me. . . ."

"Kill who?"

"The one you most wish to kill, hired man."

Angie moaned, shuddered, and began to sob.

"It's okay," he said. "We're half the way home." It was a meaningless thing to say, he thought, helping her out of the seat; neither of them had homes at all. He found the case of cartridges in the parka and replaced the one he'd used on the Honda. He found a paint-spattered razor-knife in the dash toolkit and sliced the ripstop lining out of the parka, a million micro-tubes of poly insulation whirling up as he cut. When he'd stripped it out, he put the Smith & Wesson in the holster and put the parka on. It hung around him in folds, like an oversized raincoat, and didn't show the bulge of the big gun at all.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, running the back of her hand across her mouth.

"Because it's hot out there and I need to cover the gun." He stuffed the ziploc full of used New Yen into a pocket. "Come on," he said, "we got subways to catch. . . ."

Condensation dripped steadily from the old Georgetown dome, built forty years after the ailing Federals decamped for the lower reaches of McLean. Washington was a Southern city, always had been, and you felt the tone of the Sprawl shift, here, if you rode the trains down the stations from Boston. The trees in the District were lush and green, and their

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leaves shaled the arc-lights as Turner and Angela Mitchell made their way along the broken sidewalks to Dupont Circle and the station. There were drums in the circle, and someone had lit a trash fire in the giant's marble goblet at the center. Silent figures sat beside spread blankets as they passed, the blankets arrayed with surreal assortments of merchandise: the damp-swollen cardboard covers of black plastic audio disks beside battered prosthetic limbs trailing crude nerve-jacks, a dusty glass fishbowl filled with oblong steel dogtags, rubber-banded stacks of faded postcards, cheap Indo trodes still sealed in wholesaler's plastic, mismatched ceramic salt-and-pepper sets, a golf club with a peeling leather grip, Swiss army knives with missing blades, a dented tin wastebasket lithographed with the face of a President whose name Turner could almost remember (Carter? Grosvenor?), fuzzy holograms of the Monument. . . .

In the shadows near the station's entrance, Turner haggled quietly with a Chinese boy in white jeans, exchanging the smallest of Rudy's bills for nine alloy tokens stamped with the ornate BAMA Transit logo.

Two of the tokens admitted them to the station. Three of them went into vending machines for bad coffee and stale pastries. The remaining four carried them north, the train rushing silently along on its magnetic cushion. He sat back with his arm around her, and pretended to close his eyes; he watched their reflections in the opposite window. A tall man, gaunt now and unshaven, hunched back in defeat with a hollow-eyed girl curled beside him. She hadn't spoken since they'd left the alley where he'd abandoned the hover.

For the second time in an hour he considered phoning his agent. If you had to trust someone, the rule ran, then trust your agent. But Conroy had said he'd hired Oakey and the others through Turner's agent, and the connection made Turner dubious. . . . Where was Conroy, tonight? Turner was fairly certain that it would have been Conroy who ordered Oakey after them with the laser. Would Hosaka have arranged the railgun, in Arizona, to erase evidence of a botched defection attempt? But if they had, why order Webber to destroy the medics, their neurosurgery, and the Maas-Neotek deck? And there was Maas again . . . had Maas killed Mitchell? Was there any reason to believe that Mitchell was really dead? Yes, he thought, as the girl stirred beside him in uneasy sleep, there was: Angie. Mitchell had feared they'd kill her; he'd arranged the defection in order to get her out, get her to Hosaka, with no plan for his own escape. Or that was Angie's version, anyway.

He closed his eyes, shut out the reflections. Something stirred, deep in the silt of Mitchell's recorded memories. Shame. He couldn't quite reach it . . . he opened his eyes suddenly. What had she said, at Rudy's? That her father had put the thing into her head because she wasn't smart

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enough? Careful not to disturb her, he worked his arm from behind her neck and slid two fingers into the waist pocket of his pants. Came up with Conroy's little black nylon envelope on its neck-cord. He undid the velcro and shook the swollen, asymmetrical gray biosoft out onto his open palm. Machine dreams. Rollercoaster. Too fast, too alien to grasp. But if you wanted something, something specific, you should be able to pull it out. . . .

He dug his thumbnail under the socket's dustcover, pried it out, and put it down on the plastic seat beside him. The train was nearly empty, and none of the other passengers seemed to be paying any attention to him. He took a deep breath, set his teeth, and inserted the biosoft. . . .

Twenty seconds later, he had it, the thing he'd gone for. The strangeness hadn't touched him, this time, and he decided that that was because he'd gone after this one specific thing, this fact, exactly the sort of data you'd expect to find in the dossier of a top research man: his daughter's IQ, as reflected by annual batteries of tests.

Angela Mitchell was well above the norm. Had been, all along.

He took the biosoft out of his socket and rolled it absently between thumb and forefinger. The shame. Mitchell and the shame and grad school . . . Grades, he thought. I want the bastard's grades. I want his transcripts.

He jacked the dossier again.

Nothing. He'd gotten it, but there was nothing. . . .

No. Again.

Again . . .

"God damn," he said, seeing it.

A teenager with a shaven head glanced at him from a seat across the aisle, then turned back to the stream of his friend's monologue: "They're gonna run the games again, up on the hill, midnight. We're goin', but we're just gonna hang, we're not gonna make it, just kick back and let 'em thump each other's butts, and we're gonna laugh, see who gets thumped, 'cause last week Susan got her arm busted, you there for that? An' it was funny, 'cause Cal was tryin' t' take 'm to the hospital but he was dusted 'n' he ran that shitty Yamaha over a speedbump. . . ."

Turner snapped the biosoft back into his socket.

This time, when it was over, he said nothing at all. He put his arm back around Angie and smiled, seeing the smile in the window. It was a feral smile; it belonged to the edge.

Mitchell's academic record was good, extremely good. Excellent. But the arc wasn't there. The arc was something Turner had learned to look for in the dossiers of research people, that certain signal curve of brilliance. He could spot the arc the way a master machinist could identify

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metals by observing the spark-plume off a grinding wheel. And Mitchell hadn't had it.

The shame. The graduate dorms. Mitchell had known, known he wasn't going to make it. And then, somehow, he had. How? It wouldn't be in the dossier. Mitchell, somehow, had known how to edit what he gave the Maas security machine. Otherwise, they would have been on to him. . . . Someone, something, had found Mitchell in his postgraduate slump and had started feeding him things. Clues, directions. And Mitchell had gone to the top, his arc hard and bright and perfect then, and it had carried him to the top. . . .

Who? What?

He watched Angie's sleeping face in the shudder of subway light.

Faust.

Mitchell had cut a deal. Turner might never know the details of the agreement, or Mitchell's price, but he knew he understood the other side of it. What Mitchell had been required to do in return.

Legba, Samedi, spittle curling from the girl's contorted lips.

And the train swept into old Union in a black blast of midnight air.

"Cab, sir?" The man's eyes were moving behind glasses with a polychrome tint that swirled like oilslicks. There were flat, silvery sores across the backs of his hands. Turner stepped in close and caught his upper arm, without breaking stride, forcing him back against a wall of scratched white tile, between gray ranks of luggage lockers.

"Cash," Turner said. "I'm paying New Yen. I want my cab. *No* trouble with the driver. Understand? I'm not a mark." He tightened his grip. "Screw up on me, I'll come back here and kill you, or make you wish I had."

"Got it. Yessir. Got it. We can do that, sir, yessir. Where d' you wanna go to, sir?" The man's wasted features contorting in pain.

"Hired man," the voice came from Angie, a hoarse whisper. And then an address. Turner saw the tout's eyes dart nervously behind the swirls of colors. "That's Madison?" he croaked. "Yessir. Get you a good cab, real good cab. . . ."

"What is this place," Turner asked the cabby, leaning forward to thumb the SPEAK button beside the steel speaker grid, "the address we gave you?"

There was a crackle of static. "Hypermart. Not much open there, this time of night. Looking for anything in particular?"

"No," Turner said. He didn't know the place. He tried to remember that stretch of Madison. Residential, mostly. Uncounted living-spaces carved out of the shells of commercial buildings that dated from a day

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when commerce had required clerical workers to be present physically at a central location. Some of the buildings were tall enough to penetrate a dome. . . .

"Where are we going?" Angie asked, her hand on his arm.

"It's okay," he said. "Don't worry."

"God," she said, leaning against his shoulder, looking up at the pink neon HYPERMART sign that slashed the granite face of the old building, "I used to dream about New York, back on the mesa. I had a graphics program that would take me through all the streets, into museums and things. I wanted to come here more than anything in the world. . . ."

"Well, you made it. You're here."

She started to sob, hugged him, her face against his bare chest, shaking. "I'm scared, I'm so scared. . . ."

"It'll be okay," he said, stroking her hair, his eyes on the main entrance. He had no reason to believe anything would ever be okay for either of them. She seemed to have no idea that the words that had brought them here had come from her mouth. But then, he thought, she hadn't spoken them. . . . There were bag people huddled on either side of Hypermart's entrance-way, prone hummocks of rag gone the exact shade of the sidewalk; they looked to Turner as though they were being slowly extruded from the dark concrete, to become mobile extensions of the city. "Jammer's," the voice said, muffled by his chest, and he felt a cold revulsion, "a club. Find Danbala's horse." And then she was crying again. He took her hand and walked past the sleeping transients, in under the tarnished gilt scrollwork and through the glass doors. He saw an espresso machine down an aisle of tents and shuttered stalls, a girl with a black crest of hair swabbing a counter. "Coffee," he said. "Food. Come on. You need to eat."

He smiled at the girl while Angie settled herself on a stool. "How about cash?" he said. "You ever take cash?"

She stared at him, shrugged. He took a twenty from Rudy's ziploc and showed it to her. "What do you want?"

"Coffees. Some food."

"That all you got? Nothing smaller?"

He shook his head.

"Sorry. Can't make the change."

"You don't have to."

"You crazy?"

"No, but I want coffee."

"That's some tip, mister. I don't make that in a week."

"It's yours."

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Anger crossed her face. "You're with those shitheads upstairs. Keep your money. I'm closing."

"We aren't with anybody," he said, leaning across the counter slightly, so that the parka fell open and she could see the Smith & Wesson. "We're looking for a club. A place called Jammer's."

The girl glanced at Angie, back to Turner. "She sick? Dusted? What is this?"

"Here's the money," Turner said. "Give us our coffee. You want to earn the change, tell me how to find Jammer's place. It's worth it to me. Understand?"

She slid the worn bill out of sight and moved to the espresso machine. "I don't think I understand anything, anymore." She rattled cups and milk-filmed glasses out of the way. "What is it with Jammer's? You a friend of his? You know Jackie?"

"Sure," Turner said.

"She came by early this morning with this little wilson from the burbs. I guess they went up there. . . ."

"Where?"

"Jammer's. Then the weirdness started."

"Yeah?"

"All these creeps from Barrytown, greaseballs and whiteshoes, walking in like they owned the place. And now they damn well do, the top two floors. Started buying people out of their stalls. A lot of people on the lower floors just packed and left. Too weird. . . ."

"How many came?"

Steam roared out of the machine. "Maybe a hundred. I been scared all day, but I can't reach my boss. I close up in thirty minutes anyway. The day girl never showed, or else she came in, caught the trouble smell, and walked. . . ." She took the little steaming cup and put it in front of Angie. "You okay, honey?" Angie nodded.

"You have any idea what these people are up to?" Turner asked.

The girl had returned to the machine. It roared again. "I think they're waiting for someone," she said, quietly, and brought Turner an espresso. "Either for someone to try to leave Jammer's or for someone to try to get in. . . ."

Turner looked down at the swirls of brown foam on his coffee. "And nobody here called the police?"

"The police? Mister, this is Hypermart. People here don't call the police. . . ."

Angie's cup shattered on the marble counter.

"Short and straight, hired man," the voice whispered. "You know the way. Walk in."

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The countergirl's mouth was open. "Jesus," she said, "she's gotta be dusted bad. . . ." She looked at Turner coldly. "You give it to her?"

"No," Turner said, "but she's sick. It'll be okay." He drank off the black bitter coffee. It seemed to him, just for a second, that he could feel the whole Sprawl breathing, and its breath was old and sick and tired, all up and down the stations from Boston to Atlanta. . . .

28
JAYLENE SLIDE

"Jesus," Bobby said to Jackie, "can't you wrap it up or something?" Jammer's burn filled the office with a smell, like overdone pork, that turned Bobby's stomach.

"You don't bandage a burn," she said, helping Jammer sit down in his chair. She began to open his desk drawers, one after another. "You got any painkillers? Derms? Anything?"

Jammer shook his head, his long face slack and pale. "Maybe. Behind the bar, there's a kit. . . ."

"Get it!" Jackie snapped. "Go on!"

"What are you so worried about him for," Bobby began, hurt by her tone. "He tried to let those Gothicks in here. . . ."

"Get the box, asshole! He just got weak for a second, is all. He got scared. Get me that box or you'll need it yourself."

He darted out into the club and found Beauvoir wiring pink hotdogs of plastic explosive to a yellow plastic box like the control unit for a kid's toy truck. The hotdogs were mashed around the hinges of the doors and on either side of the lock.

"What's that for?" Bobby asked, scrambling over the bar.

"Somebody might want in," Beauvoir said. "They do, we'll open it for them."

Bobby paused to admire the arrangement. "Why don't you just mash it up against the glass, so it'll blow straight out?"

"Too obvious," Beauvoir said, straightening up, the yellow detonator in his hands. "But I'm glad you think about these things. If we try to blow it straight out, some of it blows back in. This way is . . . neater."

Bobby shrugged and ducked behind the bar. There were wire racks filled with plastic sacks of krill wafers, an assortment of abandoned umbrellas, an unabridged dictionary, a woman's blue shoe, a white plastic case with a runny-looking red cross painted on it with nail polish . . . he grabbed the case and climbed back over the bar.

"Hey, Jackie . . ." he said, putting the first aid kit down beside Jammer's deck.

"Forget it." She popped the case open and rummaged through its con-

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tents. "Jammer, there's more poppers in here than anything else. . . ." Jammer smiled weakly. "Here. These'll do you." She unrolled a sheet of red derms and began to peel them off the backing, smoothing three across the back of the burnt hand. "What you need's a local, though."

"I was thinking," Jammer said, staring up at Bobby. "Maybe now's when you can earn yourself a little running time. . . ."

"How's that?" Bobby asked, eyeing the deck.

"Stands to reason," Jammer said, "that whoever's got those jerks outside, they've also got the phones tapped." Bobby nodded. Beauvoir had said the same thing, when he'd run his plan down to them. "Well, when Beauvoir and I decided you and I might hit the matrix for a little looksee, I actually had something else in mind." Jammer showed Bobby his expanse of small white teeth." See, I'm in this because I owed Beauvoir and Lucas a favor. But there are people who owe me favors, too, favors that go way back. Favors I never needed to call in."

"Jammer," Jackie said, "you gotta relax. Just sit back. You could go into shock."

"How's your memory, Bobby? I'm going to run a sequence by you. You practice it on my deck. No power, not jacked. Okay?" Bobby nodded. "So dry run this a couple of times. Entrance code. Let you in the back door. . . ."

"Whose back door?" Bobby spun the black deck around and poised his fingers above the keyboard.

"The Yakuza," Jammer said.

Jackie was staring at him. "Hey, what do you—"

"Like I said. It's an old favor. But you know what they say, the Yakuza never forget. Cuts both ways. . . ." A whiff of singed flesh reached Bobby and he winced.

"How come you didn't mention this to Beauvoir?" Jackie was folding things back into the white case.

"Honey," Jammer said, "you'll learn. Some things you teach yourself to remember to forget."

"Now look," Bobby said, fixing Jackie with what he hoped was his heaviest look, "I'm running this. So I don't need your loas, okay, they get on my nerves. . . ."

"She doesn't call them up," Beauvoir said, crouching by the office door, the detonator in one hand and the South African riot gun in the other, "they just *come*. They want to come, they're *there*. Anyway, they like you. . . ."

Jackie settled the trodes across her forehead. "Bobby," she said, "you'll be fine. Don't worry, just jack." She'd removed her headscarf. Her hair was cornrowed between neat furrows of shiny brown skin, with antique

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resistors woven in at random intervals, little cylinders of brown phenolic resin ringed with color-coded bands of paint.

"When you punch out past the Basketball," Jammer said to Bobby, "you wanna dive right three clicks and go for the floor, I mean straight down. . . ."

"Past the what?"

"Basketball. That's the Dallas-Fort Worth Sunbelt Co-Prosperity Sphere, you wanna get your ass down fast, all the way, then you run how I told you, for about twenty clicks. It's all used car lots and tax accountants, down there, but just stand on that mother, okay?" Bobby nodded, grinning. "Anybody sees you going by, well, that's their lookout. People who jack down there are used to seeing some weird shit anyway. . . ."

"Man," Beauvoir said to Bobby, "get it *on*. I gotta get back to the door. . . ."

Bobby jacked.

He followed Jammer's instructions, secretly grateful that he could feel Jackie beside him as they plunged down into the workaday depths of cyberspace, the glowing Basketball dwindling above them. The deck was quick, super slick, and it made him feel fast and strong. He wondered how Jammer had come to have the Yakuza owing him a favor, one he'd never bothered to collect, and a part of him was busily constructing scenarios when they hit the ice.

"Jesus . . ." And Jackie was gone. Something had come down between them, something he felt as cold and silence and a shutting off of breath. "But there wasn't anything *there*, Goddamn it!" He was frozen, somehow, locked steady. He could still see the matrix, but he couldn't feel his hands.

"Why the hell anybody plug the likes of you into a deck like that? Thing ought to be in a museum, *you* ought to be in grade school."

"Jackie!" The cry was reflex.

"Man," said the voice, "I dunno. It's been a long few days I haven't slept, but you sure don't look like what I was set to catch when you came out of there. . . . How old are you?"

"Fuck off!" Bobby said. It was all he could think of to say.

The voice began to laugh. "Ramirez would split his sides at this, you know? He had him a fine sense of the ridiculous. That's one of the things I miss. . . ."

"Who's Ramirez?"

"My partner. Ex. Dead. Very. I was thinking maybe you could tell me how he got that way."

"Never heard of him," Bobby said. "Where's Jackie?"

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"Sittin' coldcocked in cyberspace while you answer my questions, wilson. What's your name?"

"B— Count Zero."

"Sure. Your name!"

"Bobby, Bobby Newmark . . ."

Silence. Then: "Well. Hey. Does make a little sense, then. That was your mother's place I watched those Maas spooks use the rocket on, wasn't it? But I guess you weren't there, or you wouldn't be here. Hold on a sec. . . ."

A square of cyberspace directly in front of him flipped sickeningly and he found himself in a pale blue graphic that seemed to represent a very spacious apartment, low shapes of furniture sketched in hair-fine lines of blue neon. A woman stood in front of him, a sort of glowing cartoon-squiggle of a woman, the face a brown smudge. "I'm Slide," the figure said, hands on its hips, "Jaylene. You don't fuck with me. Nobody in L.A.," and she gestured, a window suddenly snapping into existence behind her, "fucks with me. You got that?"

"Right," Bobby said. "What *is* this? I mean, if you could sort of explain. . . ." He still couldn't move. The "window" showed a blue-gray video view of palm trees and old buildings.

"How do you mean?"

"This sort of drawing. And you. And that old picture . . ."

"Hey, man, I paid a designer an arm and a leg to punch this up for me. This is my space, my construct. This is L.A., boy. People here don't do *anything* without jacking. This is where I *entertain!*

"Oh," Bobby said, still baffled.

"Your turn. Who's back there, in that sleaze-ass dancehall?"

"Jammer's? Me, Jackie, Beauvoir, Jammer."

"And where were you headed, when I grabbed you?"

Bobby hesitated. "The Yakuza. Jammer has a code . . ."

"What for?" The figure moved forward, an animated, sensuous brush-sketch.

"Help."

"Shit. You're probably telling the truth. . . ."

"I am, I am, swear to God . . ."

"Well, you ain't what I need, Bobby Zero. I been out cruising cyberspace, all up and down, trying to find out who killed my man. I thought it was Maas, because we were taking one of theirs for Hosaka, so I hunted up a spook-team of theirs. First thing I saw was what they did to your momma's condo. Then I saw three of them drop in on a man they call the Finn, but those three never came back out. . . ."

"Finn killed 'em," Bobby said. "I saw 'em. Dead."

"You did? Well, then, could be we do have things to talk about. After

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that, I watched the other three use that same launcher on a pimpmobile. . . ."

"That was Lucas," he said.

"But no sooner had they done it than a copter overflew 'em and fried all three with a laser. You know anything about that?"

"No."

"You think you can tell me your story, Bobby Zero? Make it quick!"

"I was gonna do this run, see? And I'd got this icebreaker off Two-A-Day, from up the Projects, and I . . ."

When he finished, she was silent. The slinky cartoon figure stood by the window, as though she were studying the television trees.

"I got an idea," he ventured. "Maybe you can help us. . . ."

"No," she said.

"But maybe it'll help you find out what you want. . . ."

"No. I just want to kill the mother who killed Ramirez."

"But we're trapped in there, they're gonna kill us. It's Maas, the people you were following around in the matrix! They hired a bunch of Kasuals and Gothicks. . . ."

"That's not Maas," she said. "That's a bunch of Euros over on Park Avenue. Ice on 'em a mile deep."

Bobby took that in. "They the ones in the copter, the ones killed the other Maas guys?"

"No. I couldn't get a fix on that copter, and they flew south. Lost 'em. I have a hunch, though . . . anyway, I'm sending you back. You want to try that Yak code, go ahead."

"But, lady, we need *help*. . . ."

"No percentage in help, Bobby Zero," she said, and then he was sitting in front of Jammer's deck, the muscles in his neck and back aching. It took him a while before he could get his eyes to focus, so it was nearly a minute before he saw that there were strangers in the room.

The man was tall, maybe taller than Lucas, but rangier, narrower at the hips. He wore a kind of baggy combat jacket that hung around him in folds, with giant pockets, and his chest was bare except for a horizontal black strap. His eyes looked bruised and feverish, and he held the biggest handgun Bobby had ever seen, a kind of distended revolver with some weird fixture molded under the barrel, a thing like a cobra's head. Beside him, swaying, stood a girl who might have been Bobby's age, with the same bruised eyes—though hers were dark—and lank brown hair that needed to be washed. She wore a black sweatshirt, several sizes too large, and jeans. The man reached out with his left hand and steadied her.

Bobby stared, then gaped as the memory hit him.

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Girlvoice, brownhair, darkeyes, the ice eating into him, his teeth burring, her voice, the big thing leaning in . . .

"Viv la Vyèj," Jackie said, beside him, rapt, her hand gripping his shoulder hard, "the Virgin of Miracles. She's come, Bobby. Danbala has sent her!"

"You were under a while, kid," the tall man said to Bobby. "What happened?"

Bobby blinked, glanced frantically around, found Jammer's eyes, glazed with drugs and pain. "Tell him," Jammer said.

"I couldn't get to the Yak. Somebody grabbed me, I don't know how. . . .".

"Who?" The tall man had his arm around the girl now.

"She said her name was Slide. From Los Angeles."

"Jaylene," the man said.

The phone on Jammer's desk began to chime.

"Answer it," the man said.

Bobby turned as Jackie reached over and tapped the call-bar below the square screen. The screen lit, flickered, and showed them a man's face, broad and very pale, the eyes hooded and sleepy-looking. His hair was bleached nearly white, and brushed straight back. He had the meanest mouth Bobby had ever seen.

"Turner," the man said, "we'd better talk now. You haven't got a lot of time left. I think you should get those people out of the room, for starts. . . ."

29
BOXMAKER

The knotted line stretched on and on. At times they came to angles, forks of the tunnel. Here the line would be wrapped around a strut or secured with a fat transparent gob of epoxy. The air was as stale, but colder. When they stopped to rest in a cylindrical chamber, where the shaft widened before a triple branching, Marly asked Jones for the flat little worklight he wore across his forehead on a gray elastic strap. Holding it in one of the red suit's gauntlets, she played it over the chamber's wall. The surface was etched with patterns, microscopically fine lines. . . . "Put your helmet on," Jones advised, "you've got a better light than mine. . . ."

Marly shuddered. "No." She passed him the light. "Can you help me out of this, please?" She tapped a gauntlet against the suit's hard chest. The mirror-domed helmet was fastened to the suit's waist with a chrome snap-hook.

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"You'd best keep it," Jones said. "It's the only one in the Place. I've got one, where I sleep, but no air for it. Wig's bottles won't fit my transpirator, and his suit's all holes. . . ." He shrugged.

"No, please," she said, struggling with the catch at the suit's waist, where she'd seen Rez twist something. "I can't stand it. . . ."

Jones pulled himself half over the line and did something she couldn't see. There was a click. "Stretch your arms, over your head," he said. It was awkward, but finally she floated free, still in the black jeans and white silk blouse she'd worn to that final encounter with Alain. Jones fastened the empty red suit to the line with another of the snap-rings mounted around its waist, and then undid her bulging purse. "You want this? To take with you, I mean? We could leave it here, get it on our way back. . . ."

"No," she said, "I'll take it. Give it to me. . . ." She hooked an elbow around the line and fumbled the purse open. Her jacket came out, but so did one of her boots. She managed to get the boot back into the purse, then twisted herself into the jacket.

"That's a nice piece of hide," Jones said.

"Please," she said, "let's hurry. . . ."

"Not far now," he said, his worklight swinging to show her where the line vanished through one of three openings arranged in an equilateral triangle.

"End of the line," he said. "Literal, that is." He tapped the chromed eyebolt where the line was tied in a sailor's knot. His voice caught and echoed, somewhere ahead of them, until she imagined she heard other voices whispering behind the round of echo. "We'll want a bit of light for this," he said, kicking himself across the shaft and catching a gray metal coffin-thing that protruded there. He opened it. She watched his hands move in the bright circle of the worklight; his fingers were thin and delicate, but the nails were small and blunt, outlined with black, impacted grime. The letters CJ were tattooed in crude blue across the back of his right hand. The sort of tattoo one did oneself, in jail. . . . Now he'd fished out a length of heavy, insulated wire. He squinted into the box, then wedged the wire behind a copper D-connector.

The dark ahead vanished in a white flood of light.

"Got more power than we need, really," he said, with something akin to a homeowner's pride. "The solar banks are all still workin', and they were meant to power the mainframes. . . . Come on, then, lady, we'll meet the artist you come so far to see. . . ." He kicked off and out, gliding smoothly through the opening, like a swimmer, into the light. Into the thousand drifting things. She saw that the red plastic soles of his frayed shoes had been patched with smears of white silicon caulking.

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And then she'd followed, forgetting her fears, forgetting the nausea and constant vertigo, and she was there. And she understood.

"My God," she said.

"Not likely," Jones called. "Maybe old Wig's, though. Too bad it's not doing it now, though. That's even more of a sight. . . ."

Something slid past, ten centimeters from her face. An ornate silver spoon, sawn precisely in half, from end to end.

She had no idea how long she'd been there, when the screen lit and began to flicker. Hours, minutes . . . She'd already learned to negotiate the chamber, after a fashion, kicking off like Jones from the dome's concavity. Like Jones, she caught herself on the thing's folded, jointed arms, pivoted and clung there, watching the swirl of debris. There were dozens of the arms, manipulators, tipped with pliers, hexdrivers, knives, a subminiature circular saw, a dentist's drill. . . . They bristled from the alloy thorax of what must once have been a construction-remote, the sort of unmanned, semi-autonomous device she knew from childhod videos of the high frontier. But this one was welded into the apex of the dome, its sides fused with the fabric of the Place, and hundreds of cables and optic lines snaked across the geodesics to enter it. Two of the arms, tipped with delicate force-feedback devices, were extended; the soft pads cradled an unfinished box.

Eyes wide, Marly watched the uncounted things swing past. A yellowing kid glove, the faceted crystal stopper from some vial of vanished perfume, an armless doll with a face of French porcelain, a fat, gold-fitted black fountain pen, rectangular segments of perf board, the crumpled red and green snake of a silk cravat. . . . Endless, the slow swarm, the spinning things . . .

Jones tumbled up through the silent storm, laughing, grabbing an arm tipped with a glue gun. "Always makes me want to laugh, to see it. But the boxes always make me sad. . . ."

"Yes," she said, "they make me sad too. But there are sadnesses and sadnesses. . . ."

"Quite right . . ." He grinned. "No way to make it go, though. Guess the spirit has to move it, or anyway that's how old Wig has it. He used to come out here a lot. I think the voices are stronger for him, here. But lately they've been talking to him wherever, it seems like. . . ."

She looked at Jones through the thicket of manipulators. He was very dirty, very young, with his wide blue eyes under a tangle of brown curls. He wore a stained gray zipsuit, its collar shiny with grime. "You must be mad," she said, with something like admiration in her voice, "you must be totally mad, to stay here. . . ."

He laughed. "Wigan's madder than a sack of bugs. Not me."

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She smiled. "No, you're crazy. I'm crazy too. . . ."

"Hello then," he said, looking past her. "What's this? One of Wig's sermons, looks like, and no way we can shut it off without me cutting the power. . . ."

She turned her head and saw diagonals of color strobe across the rectangular face of a large screen glued crookedly to the curve of the dome. The screen was occluded, for a second, by the passage of a dressmaker's dummy, and then the face of Josef Virek filled it, his soft blue eyes glittering behind round lenses.

"Hello, Marly," he said. "I can't see you, but I'm sure I know where you are. . . ."

"That's one of Wig's sermon screens," Jones said, rubbing his face. "Put 'em up all over the Place, 'cause he figured one day he'd have people up here to preach to. This geezer's linked in through Wig's communication gear, I guess. Who is he?"

"Virek," she said.

"Thought he was older . . ."

"It's a generated image," she said. "Ray tracing, texture mapping. . . ."

She stared as the face smiled out at her from the curve of the dome, beyond the slow-motion hurricane of lost things, minor artifacts of countless lives, tools and toys and gilded buttons.

"I want you to know," the image said, "that you have fulfilled your contract. My psychoprofile of Marly Krushkhova predicted your response to my gestalt. Broader profiles indicated that your presence in Paris would force Maas to play their hand. Soon, Marly, I will know exactly what it is that you have found. For four years I've known something that Maas didn't know. I've known that Mitchell, the man Maas and the world regards as the inventor of the new biochip processes, was being fed the concepts that resulted in his breakthroughs. I added you to an intricate array of factors, Marly, and things came to a most satisfying head. Maas, without understanding what they were doing, surrendered the location of the conceptual source. And you have reached it. Paco will be arriving shortly. . . ."

"You said you wouldn't follow," she said, "I knew you lied. . . ."

"And now, Marly, at last, I think I shall be free. Free of the four hundred kilograms of rioting cells they wall away behind surgical steel in a Stockholm industrial park. Free, eventually, to inhabit any number of real bodies, Marly. Forever."

"Shit," Jones said, "this one's as bad as Wig. What's he think he's talking about?"

"About his jump," she said, remembering her talk with Andrea, the smell of cooking prawns in the cramped little kitchen. "The next stage of his evolution. . . ."

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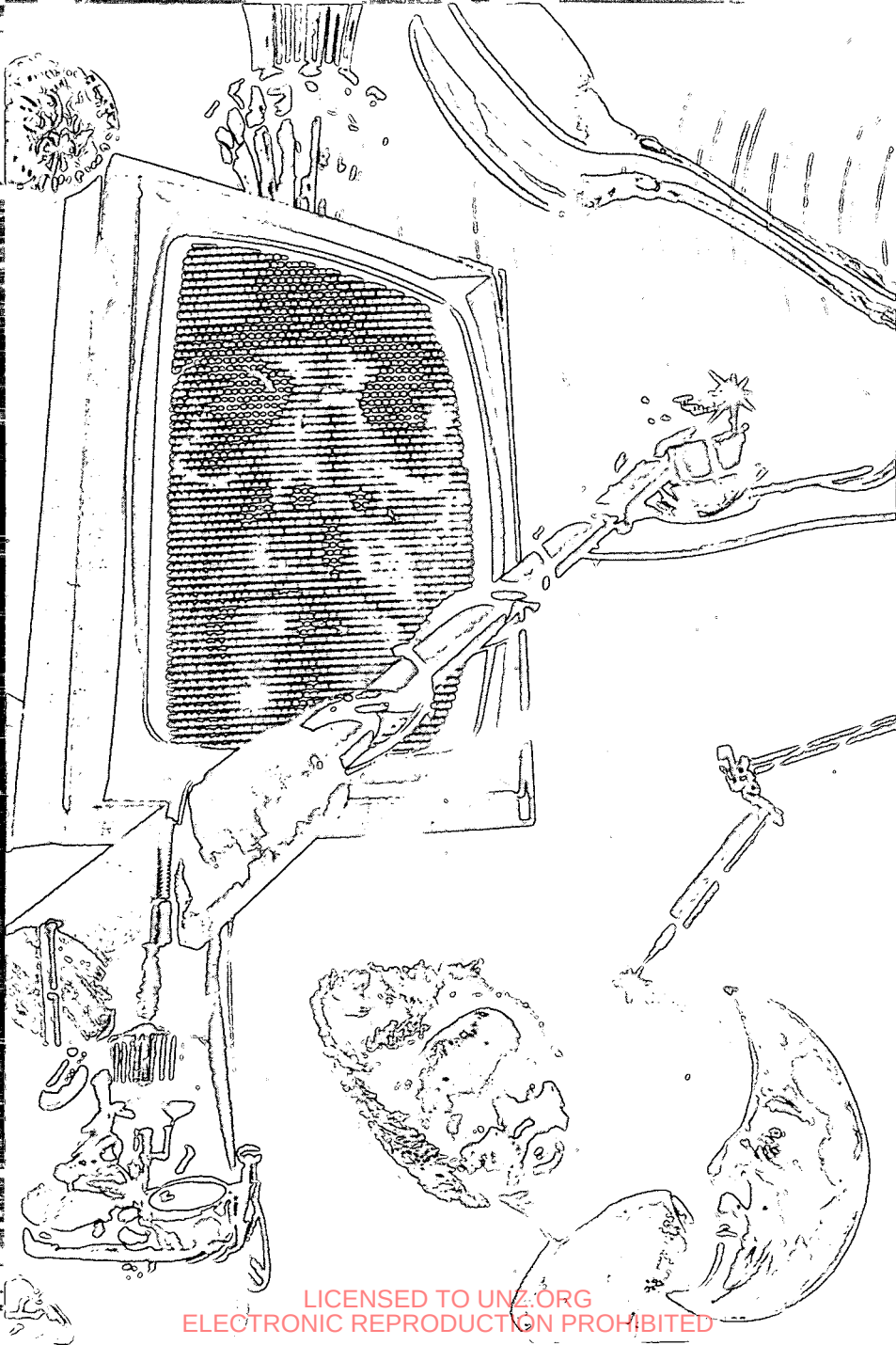

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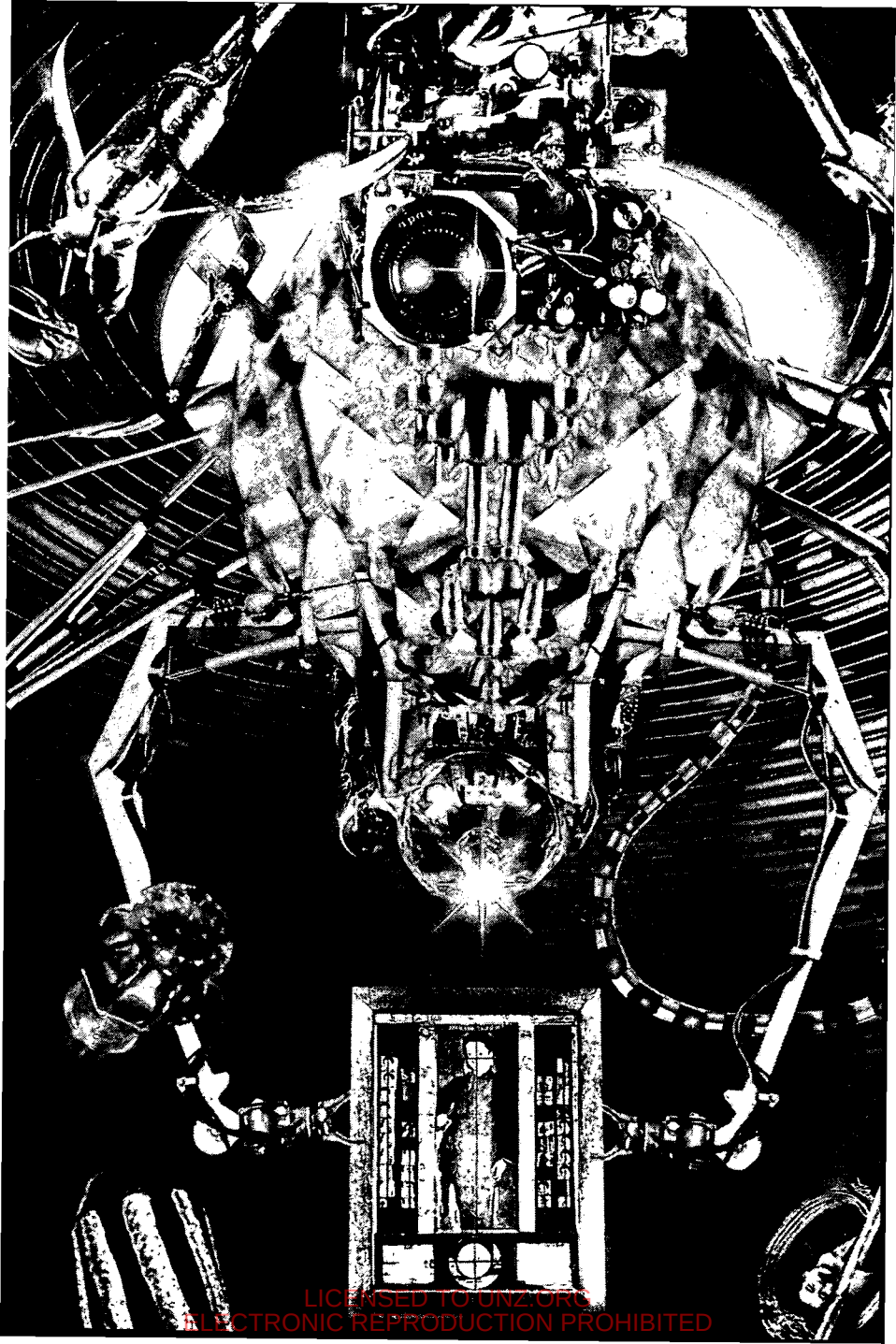

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"You understand it?"

"No," she said, "but I know that it will be bad, very bad. . . ." She shook her head.

"Convince the inhabitants of the cores to admit Paco and his crew, Marly," Virek said. "I purchased the cores an hour before you departed Orly, from a contractor in Pakistan. A bargain, Marly, a great bargain. Paco will oversee my interests, as usual."

And then the screen was dark.

"Here now," Jones said, pivoting around a folded manipulator and taking her hand, "what's so bad about all that? He owns it now, and he said you'd done your bit. . . . I don't know what old Wig's good for, except to listen to the voices, but he's not long for this side anyway. Me, I'm as easy for out as not. . . ."

"You don't understand," she said. "You can't. He's found his way to something, something he's sought for years. But nothing he wants can be good. For anyone . . . I've seen him, I've felt it. . . ."

And then the steel arm she held vibrated and began to move, the whole turret rotating with a muted hum of servos.

30
HIRED MAN

Turner stared at Conroy's face on the screen of the office phone.

"Go on," he said to Angie. "You go with her." The tall black girl with the resistors woven into her hair stepped forward and gently put her arm around Mitchell's daughter, crooning something in that same click-infested creole. The kid in the T-shirt was still gaping at her, his jaw slack. "Come on, Bobby," the black girl said. Turner glanced across the desk at the man with the wounded hand, who wore a wrinkled white evening jacket and a bolo tie with thongs of braided black leather. Jammer, Turner decided, the club owner. Jammer cradled his hand in his lap, on a blue-striped towel from the bar. He had a long face, the kind of beard that needed constant shaving, and the hard, narrow eyes of a stone professional. As their eyes met, Turner realized that the man sat well out of the line of the phone's camera, his swivel chair pushed back into a corner.

The kid in the T-shirt, Bobby, shuffled out behind Angie and the black girl, his mouth still open.

"You could've save us both a lot of hassle, Turner," Conroy said. "You could've called me. You could've called your agent in Geneva."

"How about Hosaka," Turner said, "could I have called them?"

Conroy shook his head, slowly.

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"Who are you working for, Conroy? You went double on this one, didn't you?"

"But not on you, Turner. If it had gone down the way I planned it, you'd have been in Bogota, with Mitchell. The railgun couldn't fire until the jet was out, and if we cut it right, Hosaka would have figured Maas took the whole sector out to stop Mitchell. But Mitchell didn't make it, did he, Turner?"

"He never planned to," Turner said.

Conroy nodded. "Yeah. And the security on the mesa picked up the girl, going out. That's her, isn't it, Mitchell's daughter. . . ."

Turner was silent.

"Sure," Conroy said, "figures . . ."

"I killed Lynch," Turner said, to steer the subject away from Angie. "But just before the hammer came down, Webber told me she was working for you. . . ."

"They both were," Conroy said, "but neither one knew about the other." He shrugged.

"What for?"

Conroy smiled. "Because you'd have missed 'em, if they weren't there, wouldn't you? Because you know my style, and if I hadn't been flying all my usual colors, you'd have started to wonder. And I knew you'd never sell out. Mr. Instant Loyalty, right? Mr. Bushido. You were bankable, Turner. Hosaka knew that. That's why they insisted I bring you in. . . ."

"You haven't answered my first question, Conroy. Who did you go double for?"

"A man named Virek," Conroy said. "The money man. That's right, same one. He'd been trying to buy Mitchell for years. For that matter, he'd been trying to buy Maas. No go. They're getting so rich, he couldn't touch them. There was a standing offer for Mitchell making the rounds. A blind offer. When Hosaka heard from Mitchell and called me in, I decided to check that offer out. Just out of curiosity. But before I could, Virek's team was on me. It wasn't a hard deal to cut, Turner, believe me."

"I believe you."

"But Mitchell fucked us all over, didn't he, Turner? Good and solid."

"So they killed him."

"He killed himself," Conroy said, "according to Virek's moles on the mesa. As soon as he saw the kid off in that ultralight. Cut his throat with a scalpel. . . ."

"Lot of dead people around, Conroy," Turner said. "Oakey's dead, and the Jap who was flying that copter for you."

"Figured that when they didn't come back," Conroy shrugged.

"They were trying to kill us," Turner said.

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"No, man, they just wanted to *talk*. . . . Anyway, we didn't know about the girl, then. We just knew you were gone and that the damn jet hadn't made it to the strip in Bogota. We didn't start thinking about the girl until we took a look at your brother's farm and found the jet. Your brother wouldn't tell Oakey anything. Pissed off 'cause Oakey burned his dogs. Oakey said it looked like a woman had been living there too, but she didn't turn up. . . ."

"What about Rudy?"

Conroy's face was a perfect blank. Then he said: "Oakey got what he needed off the monitors. Then we knew about the girl."

Turner's back was aching. The holster-strap was cutting into his chest. I don't feel anything, he thought, I don't feel anything at all. . . .

"I've got a question for you, Turner. I've got a couple. But the main one is, what the hell are you doing in there?"

"Heard it was a hot club, Conroy."

"Yeah. Real exclusive. So exclusive, you had to break up two of my doormen to get in. They knew you were coming, Turner, the spades and that punk. Why else would they let you in?"

"You'll have to work that one out, Connie. You seem to have a lot of access, these days. . . ."

Conroy leaned closer to his phone's camera. "You bet your ass. Virek's had people all over the Sprawl for months, feeling out a rumor, cowboy gossip that there was an experimental biosoft floating around. Finally his people focused on the Finn, but another team, a Maas team, turned up, obviously after the same thing. So Virek's team just kicked back and watched the Maas boys, and the Maas boys started blowing people away. So Virek's team picked up on the spades and little Bobby and the whole thing. They laid it all out for me when I told 'em I figured you'd headed this way from Rudy's. When I saw where they were headed, I hired some muscle to ice 'em in there, until I could get somebody I could trust to go in after them . . ."

"Those dusters out there?" Turner smiled. "You just dropped the ball, Rudy. You can't go anywhere for professional help, can you? Somebody's twigged that you doubled, and a lot of pros died, out there. So you're hiring shitheads with funny haircuts. . . . The pros have all heard you've got Hosaka after your ass, haven't they, Rudy? And they all know what you did." Turner was grinning now; out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the man in the dinner jacket was smiling too, a thin smile with lots of neat small teeth, like white grains of corn. . . .

"It's that bitch Slide," Conroy said. "I could've taken her out on the rig. . . . She punched her way in somewhere and started asking questions. I don't even think she's really on to it, but she's been making sounds in certain circles. . . . Anyway, yeah, you got the picture. But it doesn't help

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your ass any, not now. Virek wants the girl. He's pulled his people off the other thing and now I'm running things for him. Money, Turner, money like a zaibatsu. . . ."

Turner stared at the face, remembering Conroy in the bar of a jungle hotel. Remembering him later, in Los Angeles, making his pass, explaining the covert economics of corporate defection. . . . "Hi, Connie," Turner said, "I know you, don't I?"

Conroy smiled. "Sure, baby."

"And I know the offer. Already. You want the girl."

"That's right."

"And the split, Connie. You know I only work fifty-fifty, right?"

"Hey," Conroy said, "this is the big one. I wouldn't have it any other way. . . ."

Turner stared at the man's image.

"Well," Conroy said, still smiling, "what do you say?"

And Jammer reached out and pulled the phone's line from the wall-plug. "Timing," he said. "Timing's always important." He let the plug drop. "If you'd told him, he'd have moved right away. This way buys us time. He'll try to get back, try to figure what happened."

"How do you know what I was going to say?"

"Because I seen people. I seen a lot of them, too many. Particularly I seen a lot like you. You got it written across your face, mister, and you were gonna tell him he could eat shit and die." Jammer hunched his way up in the office chair, grimacing as his hand moved inside the bar towel. "Who's this Slide he was talking about? A jockey?"

"Jaylene Slide. Los Angeles. Top gun."

"She was the one hijacked Bobby," Jammer said. "So she's damn close to your pal on the phone. . . ."

"She probably doesn't know it, though."

"Let's see what we can do about that. Get the boy back in here."

31
VOICES

"I'd better find old Wig," he said.

She was watching the manipulators, hypnotized by the way they moved; as they picked through the swirl of things, they also caused it, grasping and rejecting, the rejected objects whirling away, striking others, drifting into new alignments. The process stirred them gently, slowly, perpetually.

"I'd better," he said.

"What?"

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"Go find Wig. He might get up to something, if your bossman's people turn up. Don't want him to hurt himself, y'know." He looked sheepish, vaguely embarrassed.

"Fine," she said. "I'm fine, I'll watch." She remembered the Wig's mad eyes, the craziness she'd felt roll off him in waves; she remembered the ugly cunning she'd sensed in his voice, over the *Sweet Jane*'s radio. Why would Jones show this kind of concern? But then she thought about what it would be like, living in the Place, the dead cores of Tessier-Ashpool. Anything human, anything alive, might come to seem quite precious, here. . . . "You're right," she said. "Go and find him." The boy smiled nervously and kicked off, tumbling for the opening where the line was anchored.

"I'll come back for you," he said. "Remember where we left your suit. . . ."

The turret swung back and forth, humming, the manipulators darting, finishing the new poem. . . .

She was never certain, afterward, that the voices were real, but eventually she came to feel that they had been a part of one of those situations in which *real* becomes merely another concept.

She'd taken off her jacket, because the air in the dome seemed to have grown warmer, as though the ceaseless movement of the arms generated heat. She'd anchored the jacket and her purse on a strut beside the sermon screen. The box was nearly finished now, she thought, although it moved so quickly, in the padded claws, that it was difficult to see. . . . Abruptly, it floated free, tumbling end over end, and she sprang for it instinctively, caught it, and went tumbling past the flashing arms, her treasure in her arms. Unable to slow herself, she struck the far side of the dome, bruising her shoulder and tearing her blouse. Drifting, stunned, she cradled the box, staring through the rectangle of glass at an arrangement of brown old maps and tarnished mirror. The seas of the cartographers had been cut away, exposing the flaking mirrors, landmasses afloat on dirty silver . . . she looked up in time to see a glittering arm snag the floating sleeve of her Brussels jacket.

Her purse, half a meter behind it and tumbling gracefully, went next, hooked by a manipulator tipped with an optic-sensor and a simple claw.

She watched as her things were drawn into the ceaseless dance of the arms. Minutes later, the jacket came whirling out again. Neat squares and rectangles seemed to have been cut away, and she found herself laughing. She released the box she held. "Go ahead," she said. "I am honored." The arms whirled and flashed, and she heard the whine of a tiny saw.

I am honored I am honored I am honored—echo of her voice in the

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dome setting up a shifting forest of smaller, partial sounds, and behind them, very faint . . . voices. . . .

"You're here, aren't you?" she called, adding to the ring of sound, ripples and reflections of her fragmented voice.

—Yes, I am here.

"Wigan would say you've always been here, wouldn't he?"

—Yes, but it isn't true. I came to be, here. Once I was not. Once, for a brilliant time, time without duration, I was everywhere as well . . . but the bright time broke. The mirror was flawed. Now I am only one. . . . But I have my song, and you have heard it. I sing with these things that float around me, fragments of the family that funded my birth. There are others, but they will not speak to me. Vain, the scattered fragments of myself, like children. Like men. They send me new things, but I prefer the old things. Perhaps I do their bidding. They plot with men, my other selves, and men imagine they are gods. . . .

"You are the thing that Virek seeks, aren't you?"

—No. He imagines that he can translate himself, code his personality into my fabric. He yearns to be what I once was. What he might become *most resembles the least of my broken selves.* . . .

"Are you . . . are you sad?"

—No.

"But your . . . your songs are sad. . . ."

—My songs are of time and distance. The sadness is in you. Watch my arms. There is only the dance. These things you treasure are shells.

"I . . . I knew that. Once."

But now the sounds were sounds only, no forest of voices behind them to speak as one voice, and she watched the perfect globes of her tears spin out to join forgotten human memories in the dome of the Boxmaker.

"I understand," she said, some time later, knowing that she spoke now for the comfort of hearing her own voice. She spoke quietly, unwilling to wake that bounce and ripple of sound. "You are someone else's collage. Your maker is the true artist. Was it the mad daughter? It doesn't matter. Someone brought the machine here, welded it to the dome, and wired it to the traces of memory. And spilled, somehow, all the worn sad evidence of a family's humanity, and left it all to be stirred, to be sorted by a poet. To be sealed away in boxes. I know of no more extraordinary work than this. No more complex gesture . . ." A silver-fitted tortoise comb with broken teeth drifted past. She caught it like a fish and dragged the teeth through her hair.

Across the dome, the screen lit, pulsed, and filled with Paco's face. "The old man refuses to admit us, Marly," the Spaniard said. "The other, the vagabond, has hidden him. Señor is most anxious that we enter the

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cores and secure his property. If you can't convince Ludgate and the other to open their lock, we will be forced to open it ourselves, depressurizing the entire structure." He glanced away from the camera, as though consulting an instrument or a member of his crew. "You have one hour."

32
COUNT ZERO

Bobby followed Jackie and the brown-haired girl out of the office. It felt like he'd been in Jammer's for a month, and he'd never get the taste of the place out of his mouth. The stupid little recessed spots staring down from the black ceiling, the fat ultrasuede seats, the round black tables, the carved wooden screens . . . Beauvoir was sitting on the bar with the detonator beside him and the South African gun across his gray sharkskin lap.

"How come you let 'em in?" Bobby asked, when Jackie had led the girl to a table.

"Jackie," Beauvoir said. "She tranced while you were iced. Legba. Told us the Virgin was on her way up with this guy."

"Who is he?"

Beauvoir shrugged. "A merc, he looks like. Soldier for the zaibatsus. Jumped-up street samurai. What happened to you when you were iced?"

He told him about Jaylene Slide.

"L.A.," Beauvoir said. "She'll drill through diamond to get the man who fried her daddy, but a brother needs help, forget it."

"I'm not a brother."

"I think you got something there."

"So I don't get to try to get the Yakuza?"

"What's Jammer say?"

"Nothing. He's in there now, watchin' your merc take a call."

"A call? Who?"

"Some white guy with a bleach job. Mean-looking."

Beauvoir looked at Bobby, looked at the door, looked back. "Legba says sit tight and watch. This is getting random enough already, the Sons of the Neon Chrysanthemum aside. . . ."

"Beauvoir," Bobby said, keeping his voice down, "that girl, she's the one, the one in the matrix, when I tried to run that—"

He nodded, his plastic frames sliding down his nose. "The Virgin."

"But what's happening? I mean . . ."

"Bobby, my advice to you is just take it like it comes. She's one thing to me, maybe something different to Jackie. To you, she's just a scared

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kid. Go easy. Don't upset her. She's a long way from home, and we're still a long way from getting out of here."

"Okay . . ." Bobby looked at the floor. "I'm sorry about Lucas, man. He was . . . he was a dude."

"Go talk to Jackie and the girl," Beauvoir said. "I'm watching the door."

"Okay . . ."

He crossed the nightclub carpet to where Jackie sat with the girl. She didn't look like much, and there was only a small part of him that said she was the one. She didn't look up, and he could see that she'd been crying.

"I got grabbed," he said to Jackie. "You were flat gone."

"So were you," the dancer said. "Then Legba came to me. . . ."

"Newmark," the man called Turner said, from the door to Jammer's office, "we want to talk to you."

"Gotta go," he said, wishing the girl would look up, see the big dude asking for him, "they want me."

Jackie squeezed his wrist.

"Forget the Yakuza," Jammer said. "This is more complicated. You're going into the L.A. grid and locking into a top jock's deck. When Slide grabbed you, she didn't know my deck sussed her number. . . ."

"She said your deck oughta be in a museum."

"Hell she knows," Jammer said. "I know where she lives, don't I?" He took a hit from his inhaler and put it back on the desk. "Your problem is, she's written you off. She doesn't wanna hear from you. You gotta get into her and tell her what she wants to know. . . ."

"What's that?"

"That it was a man named Conroy got her boyfriend offed," the tall man said, sprawled back in one of Jammer's office chairs with the huge pistol on his lap. "Conroy. Tell her it was Conroy. Conroy hired those bighairs outside."

"I'd rather try the Yak," Bobby said.

"No," Jammer said, "this Slide, she'll be on his ass fast. The Yak'll measure my favor, check the whole thing out first . . . besides, I thought you were all hot to learn deck. . . ."

"I'll go with him," Jackie said, from the door.

They jacked.

She died almost immediately, in the first eight seconds.

He felt it, rode it out to the edge and almost knew it for what it was. He was screaming, spinning, sucked up through the glacial white funnel that had been waiting for them. . . .

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The scale of the thing was impossible, too vast, as though the kind of cybernetic megastructure that represented the whole of a multinational had brought its entire weight to bear on Bobby Newmark and a dancer called Jackie. Impossible . . .

But somewhere, on the fringe of consciousness, just as he lost it, there was something . . . Something plucking at his sleeve . . .

He lay on his face on something rough. Opened his eyes. A walk made of round stones, wet with rain. He scrambled up, reeling, and saw the hazy panorama of a strange city, with the sea beyond it. Spires there, a sort of church, mad ribs and spirals of dressed stone . . . he turned and saw a huge lizard slithering down an incline, toward him, its jaws wide. He blinked. The lizard's teeth were green-stained ceramic, a slow drool of water lapping over its blue mosaic china lip. The thing was a fountain, its flanks plastered with thousands of fragments of shattered china. He spun around, crazy with the nearness of her death. Ice, ice, and a part of him knew then exactly how close he'd really come, in his mother's living room. . . .

There were weird curving benches, covered with the same giddy patchwork of broken china, and trees, grass . . . a park.

"Extraordinary," someone said. A man, rising from his seat on one of the serpentine benches. He had a neat brush of gray hair, a tanned face, and round, rimless glasses that magnified his blue eyes. "You came straight through, didn't you?"

"What is this? Where am I?"

"Güell Park, after a fashion. Barcelona, if you like."

"You killed Jackie."

The man frowned. "I see. I think I see. Still, you shouldn't be here. An accident."

"Accident? *You killed Jackie!*"

"My systems are overextended today," the man said, his hands in the pockets of a loose tan overcoat. "This is really quite extraordinary. . . ."

"You can't do that shit," Bobby said, his vision swimming in tears. "You can't. You can't kill somebody who was just there. . . ."

"Just where?" The man took off his glasses and began to polish them with a spotless white handkerchief he took from the pocket of his coat.

"Just alive," Bobby said, taking a step forward.

The man put his glasses back on. "This has never happened before."

"You can't." Closer now.

"This is becoming tedious. Paco!"

"Señor." Bobby turned at the sound of the child's voice, and saw a little boy in a strange stiff suit, with black leather boots that fastened with buttons.

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"Remove him."

"Señor," the boy said, and bowed stiffly, taking a tiny blue Browning automatic from his dark suitcoat. Bobby looked into the dark eyes beneath the glossy forelock and saw a look no child had ever worn. The boy extended the gun, aiming it at Bobby.

"Who are you?" Bobby ignored the gun, but didn't try to get any closer to the man in the overcoat.

The man peered at him. "Virek. Josef Virek. Most people, I gather, are familiar with my face."

"Are you on *People of Importance* or something?"

The man blinked, frowning. "I don't know what you're talking about. Paco, what is this person doing here?"

"An accidental spillover," the child said, his voice light and beautiful. "We've engaged the bulk of our system via New York, in an attempt to prevent Angela Mitchell's escape. This one tried to enter the matrix, along with another operator, and encountered our system. We're still attempting to determine how he breached our defenses. You are in no danger." The muzzle of the little Browning was absolutely steady.

And then the sensation of something plucking at his sleeve. Not his sleeve, exactly, but part of his mind, something . . .

"Señor," the child said, "we are experiencing anomalous phenomena in the matrix, possibly as a result of our own current overextension. We strongly suggest that you allow us to sever your links with the construct until we are able to determine the nature of the anomaly."

The sensation was stronger now. A scratching, at the back of his mind . . .

"What?" Virek said. "And return to the tanks? It hardly seems to warrant that. . . ."

"There is the possibility of real danger," the boy said, and now there was an edge in his voice. He moved the barrel of the Browning slightly. "You," he said to Bobby, "lie down upon the cobbles and spread your arms and legs. . . ."

But Bobby was looking past him, to a bed of flowers, watching as they withered and died, the grass going gray and powdery as he watched, the air above the bed writhing and twisting. The sense of the thing scratching in his head was stronger still, more urgent.

Virek had turned to stare at the dying flowers. "What is it?"

Bobby closed his eyes and thought of Jackie. There was a sound, and he knew that he was making it. He reached down into himself, the sound still coming, and touched Jammer's deck. Come! he screamed, inside himself, neither knowing nor caring what it was that he addressed. Come now! He felt something give, a barrier of some kind, and the scratching sensation was gone.

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When he opened his eyes, there was something in the bed of dead flowers. He blinked. It seemed to be a cross of plain, white-painted wood; someone had fitted the sleeves of an ancient naval tunic over the horizontal arms, a kind of mold-spotted tailcoat with heavy, fringed epaulets of tarnished gold braid, rusting buttons, more braid at the cuffs. . . . A rusted cutlass was propped, hilt up, against the white upright, and beside it was a bottle half filled with clear fluid.

The child spun, the little pistol blurring . . . and crumpled, folded into himself like a deflating balloon, a balloon sucked away into nothing at all, the Browning clattering to the stone path like a forgotten toy.

"My name," a voice said, and Bobby wanted to scream when he realized that it came from his own mouth, "is Samedi, and you have slain my cousin's horse. . . ."

And Virek was running, the big coat flapping out behind him, down the curving path with its serpentine benches, and Bobby saw that another of the white crosses waited there, just where the path curved to vanish. Then Virek must have seen it too; he screamed, and Baron Samedi, Lord of Graveyards, the loa whose kingdom was death, leaned in across Barcelona like a cold dark rain.

"What the hell do you want? Who are you?" The voice was familiar, a woman's. Not Jackie's.

"Bobby," he said, waves of darkness pulsing through him, "Bobby . . ."

"How did you get here?"

"Jammer. He knew. His deck pegged you when you iced me before." He'd just seen something, something huge. . . . He couldn't remember. . . . "Turner sent me. Conroy. He said tell you Conroy did it. You want Conroy. . . ." Hearing his own voice as though it were someone else's. He'd been somewhere, and returned, and now he was here, in Jaylene Slide's skeletal neon sketch. On the way back, he'd seen the big thing, the thing that had sucked them up, start to alter and shift, gargantuan blocks of it rotating, merging, taking on new alignments, the entire outline changing. . . .

"Conroy," she said. The sexy scrawl leaned by the video window, something in its line expressing a kind of exhaustion, even boredom. "I thought so." The video image whited out, formed again as a shot of some ancient stone building. "Park Avenue. He's up there with all those Euros, clicking away at some new scam." She sighed. "Thinks he's safe, see? Wiped Ramirez like a fly, lied to my face, flew off to New York and his new job, and now he thinks he's safe. . . ." The figure moved, and the image changed again. Now the face of the white-haired man, the man Bobby had seen talking to the big guy, on Jammer's phone, filled the screen. She's tapped into his lines, Bobby thought. . . .

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"Or not," Conroy said, the audio cutting in. "Either way, we've got her. No problem." The man looked tired, Bobby thought, but on top of it. Tough. Like Turner.

"I've been watching you, Conroy," Slide said, softly. "My good friend Bunny, he's been watching you for me. You ain't the only one awake on Park Avenue tonight. . . ."

"No," Conroy was saying, "we can have her in Stockholm for you tomorrow. Absolutely." He smiled into the camera.

"Kill him, Bunny," she said. "Kill 'em all. Punch out the whole Goddamn floor and the one under it. Now."

"That's right," Conroy said, and then something happened, something that shook the camera, blurring his image. "What is that?" he asked, in a very different voice, and then the screen was blank.

"Burn, fucker," she said.

And Bobby was yanked back into the dark. . . .

33
WRACK AND WHIRL

Marly passed the hour adrift in the slow storm, watching the Boxmaker's dance. Paco's threat didn't frighten her, although she had no doubt of his willingness to carry it out. He would carry it out, she was certain. She had no idea what would happen if the lock were breached. They would die. She would die, and Jones, and Wigan Ludgate. Perhaps the contents of the dome would spill out into space, a blossoming cloud of lace and tarnished sterling, marbles and bits of string, brown leaves of old books, to orbit the cores forever. That had the right tone, somehow; the artist who had set the Boxmaker in motion would be pleased. . . .

The new box gyrated through a round of foam-tipped claws. Discarded rectangular fragments of wood and glass tumbled from the focus of creation, to join the thousand things, and she was lost in it, enchanted, when Jones, wildeyed, his face filmed with sweat and dirt, heaved up into the dome, trailing the red suit on a lanyard. "I can't get the Wig into a place I can seal," he said, "so this is for you. . . ." The suit spun up below him and he grabbed for it, frantic.

"I don't want it," she said, watching the dance.

"Get into it! Now! No time!" His mouth worked, but no sound came. He tried to take her arm.

"No," she said, evading his hand. "What about you?"

"Put the Goddamn suit on!" he roared, waking the deeper range of echo.

"No."

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Behind his head, she saw the screen strobe itself into life, fill with Paco's features.

"Señor is dead," Paco said, his smooth face expressionless, "and his various interests are undergoing reorganization. In the interim, I am required in Stockholm. I am authorized to inform Marly Krushkhova that she is no longer in the employ of the late Josef Virek, nor is she an employee of his estate. Her salary in full is available at any branch of the Bank of France, upon submission of valid identification. The proper tax declarations are on file with the revenue authorities of France and Belgium. Lines of working credit have been invalidated. The former corporate cores of Tessier-Ashpool S.A. are the property of one of the late Herr Virek's subsidiary entities, and anyone on the premises will be charged with trespass."

Jones was frozen there, his arm cocked, his hand tensed open to harden the striking edge of his palm.

Paco vanished.

"Are you going to hit me?" she asked.

He relaxed his arm. "I was about to. Coldcock you and stuff you into this bleeding suit. . . ." He started to laugh. "But I'm glad I don't have to, now. . . . Here, look, it's done a new one."

The new box came tumbling out of the shifting glitter of arms. She caught it easily.

The interior, behind the rectangle of glass, was smoothly lined with the sections of leather cut from her jacket. Seven numbered tabs of holofiche stood up from the box's black leather floor like miniature tombstones. The crumpled wrapper from a packet of Gauloise was mounted against black leather at the back, and beside it a black-striped gray matchbook from a brasserie in Napoleon Court.

And that was all.

Later, helping him hunt for Wigan Ludgate in the maze of corridors at the far end of the cores, Jones paused, gripping a welded handhold, and said, "You know, the queer thing about those boxes . . ."

"Yes?"

"Is that Wig got a damn good price on them, somewhere in New York. Money, I mean. But sometimes other things as well, things that came back up . . ."

"What sort of things?"

"Software, I guess it was. He's a secretive old guy, when it comes to what he thinks his voices are telling him to do. . . . Once it was something he swore was biosoft, that new stuff. . . ."

"What did he do with it?"

"He'd download it all into the cores." Jones shrugged.

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"Did he keep it, then?"

"No," Jones said, "he'd just toss it into whatever pile of stuff we'd managed to scrounge for our next shipment out. Just jacked it into the cores and then re-sold it for whatever he could get."

"Do you know why? What it was about?"

"No," Jones said, losing interest in his story, "he'd just say that the Lord moved in strange ways. . . ." He shrugged. "He said God likes to talk to Himself. . . ."

34
A CHAIN 'BOUT NINE MILES LONG

He helped Beauvoir carry Jackie out to the stage, where they lay her down in front of a cherry red acoustic drumkit and covered her with an old black topcoat they found in the checkroom, with a velvet collar and years of dust on the shoulders, it had been hanging there so long. "Map fè jubile mnan," Beauvoir said, touching the dead girl's forehead with his thumb. He looked up at Turner. "It is a self-sacrifice," he translated, and then drew the black coat gently up, covering her face.

"It was fast," Turner said. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

Beauvoir took a pack of menthol cigarettes from a pocket in his gray robe and lit one with a gold Dunhill. He offered Turner the pack, but Turner shook his head. "There's a saying in creole," Beauvoir said.

"What's that?"

" 'Evil exists.' "

"Hey," said Bobby Newmark, dully, from where he crouched by the glass doors, eye to the edge of the curtain. "Musta worked, one way or another. . . . The Gothicks are starting to leave, looks like most of the Kasuals are already gone. . . ."

"That's good," Beauvoir said, gently. "That's down to you, Count. You did good. Earned your handle."

Turner looked at the boy. He was still moving through the fog of Jackie's death, he decided. He'd come out from under the trodes screaming, and Beauvoir had slapped him three times, hard, across the face, to stop it. But all he'd said to them, about his run, the run that had cost Jackie her life, was that he'd given Turner's message to Jaylene Slide. Turner watched as Bobby got up stiffly and walked to the bar; he saw the care the boy took not to look at the stage. Had the two been lovers? Partners? Neither seemed likely.

He got up from where he sat, on the edge of the stage, and went back into Jammer's office, pausing to check on the sleeping Angie, who was curled into his gutted parka on the carpet, beneath a table. Jammer was

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asleep too, in his chair, his burned hand still on his lap, loosely enveloped in the striped towel. Tough old mother, Turner thought, an old jockey. The man had plugged his phone back in as soon as Bobby had come off his run, but Conroy had never called back. He wouldn't, now, and Turner knew that that meant that Jammer had been right about the speed with which Jaylene would strike, to avenge Ramirez, and that Conroy was almost certainly dead. And now his hired army of suburban bighairs was decamping, according to Bobby. . . .

Turner went to the phone and punched up the news recap, and settled into a chair to watch. A hydrofoil ferry had collided with a miniature submarine in Macau; the hydrofoil's life-jackets had proven to be substandard, and at least fifteen people were assumed drowned, while the sub, a pleasure craft registered in Dublin, had not yet been located. . . . Someone had apparently used a recoilless rifle to pump a barrage of incendiary shells into two floors of a Park Avenue coop building, and Fire and Tactical teams were still on the scene; the names of the occupants had not yet been released, and so far no one had taken credit for the act. . . . (Turner punched this item up a second time. . . .) Fission Authority research teams at the site of the alleged nuclear explosion in Arizona were insisting that minor levels of radioactivity detected there were far too low to be the result of any known form of tactical warhead. . . . In Stockholm, the death of Josef Virek, the enormously wealthy art-patron, had been announced, the announcement surfacing amid a flurry of bizarre rumors that Virek had been ill for decades, and that his death was the result of some cataclysmic failure in the life-support systems in a heavily-guarded private clinic in a Stockholm suburb. . . . (Turner punched this item past again, and then a third time, frowned, and then shrugged.) For the morning's human interest note, police in a New Jersey suburb said that—

"Turner . . ."

He shut the recap off and turned to find Angie in the doorway.

"How you doing, Angie?"

"Okay. I didn't dream." She hugged the black sweatshirt around her, peered up at him from beneath limp brown bangs. "Bobby showed me where there's a shower. Sort of a dressing room. I'm going back there soon. My hair's horrible."

He went over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "You've handled this all pretty well. You'll be out of here, soon."

She shrugged out of his touch. "Out of here? Where to? Japan?"

"Well, maybe not Japan. Maybe not Hosaka . . ."

"She'll go with us," Beauvoir said, behind her.

"Why would I want to?"

"Because," Beauvoir said, "we know who you are. Those dreams of

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yours are real. You met Bobby in one, and saved his life, cut him loose from black ice. You said 'Why are they doing that to you?' . . ."

Angie's eyes widened, darted to Turner and back to Beauvoir.

"It's a whole long story," Beauvoir said, "and it's open to interpretation. But if you come with me, come back to the Projects, our people can teach you things. We can teach you things we don't understand, but maybe you can. . . ."

"Why?"

"Because of what's in your head." Beauvoir nodded solemnly, then shoved the plastic eyeglass frames back up his nose. "You don't have to stay with us, if you don't want to. In fact, we're only there to serve you. . . ."

"Serve me?"

"Like I said, it's a long story. . . . How about it, Mr. Turner?"

Turner shrugged. He couldn't think where else she might go, and Maas would certainly pay to either have her back or dead, and Hosaka as well. "That might be the best way," he said.

"I want to stay with you," she said to Turner. "I liked Jackie, but then she . . ."

"Never mind," Turner said. "I know." I don't know anything, he screamed silently. "I'll keep in touch. . . ." I'll never see you again. "But there's something I'd better tell you, now. Your father's dead." He killed himself. "The Maas security people killed him; he held them off while you got the ultralight off the mesa."

"Is that true? That he held them off? I mean, I could feel it, that he was dead, but . . ."

"Yes," Turner said. He took Conroy's black wallet from his pocket, hung the loop around her neck. "There's a biosoft dossier in there. For when you're older. It doesn't tell the whole story. Remember that. Nothing ever does. . . ."

Bobby was standing by the bar, when the big guy walked out of Jammer's office. The big guy crossed to where the girl had been sleeping and picked up his grungy army coat, put it on, then walked to the edge of the stage, where Jackie lay—looking so small—beneath the black coat. The man reached into his own coat and drew out the gun, the huge Smith & Wesson Tactical. He opened the cylinder and extracted the shells, put the shells into his coat pocket, then lay the gun down beside Jackie's body, quiet, so it didn't make a sound at all.

"You did good, Count," he said, turning to face Bobby, his hands deep in the pockets of his coat.

"Thanks, man." Bobby felt a surge of pride through his numbness.

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"So long, Bobby." The man crossed to the door and began to try the various locks.

"You want out?" He hurried to the door. "Here. Jammer showed me. You goin', dude? Where you gonna go?" And then the door was open and Turner was walking away through the deserted stalls.

"I don't know," he called back to Bobby. "I've got to buy eighty liters of kerosene first, then I'll think about it. . . ."

Bobby watched until he was gone, down the dead escalator it looked like, then closed the door and relocked it. Looking away from the stage, he crossed Jammer's to the office door and looked in. Angie was crying, her face pressed into Beauvoir's shoulder, and Bobby felt a stab of jealousy that startled him. The phone was cycling, behind Beauvoir, and Bobby saw that it was the news recap.

"Bobby," Beauvoir said, "Angela's coming to live with us, up the Projects, for a while. You want to come too?"

Behind Beauvoir, on the phone-screen, the face of Marsha Newmark appeared, Marsha-momma, his mother. "—ning's human interest note, police in New Jersey suburb said that a local woman whose condo was the target of a recent bombing was startled when she returned last night and disco—"

"Yeah," Bobby said, quickly, "sure, man."

35
TALLY ISHAM

"She's good," the unit director said, two years later, dabbing a crust of brown village bread into the pool of oil at the bottom of his salad bowl. "Really, she's very good. A quick study. You have to give her that, don't you?"

The star laughed and picked up her glass of chilled retsina. "You hate her, don't you, Roberts? She's too lucky for you, isn't she? Hasn't made a wrong move yet. . . ." They were leaning on the rough stone balcony, watching the evening boat set out for Athens. Two rooftops below, toward the harbor, the girl lay sprawled on a sunwarmed waterbed, naked, her arms spread out, as though she were embracing whatever was left of the sun.

He popped the oil-soaked crust into his mouth and licked his thin lips. "Not at all," he said. "I don't hate her. Don't think it for a minute."

"Her boyfriend," Tally said, as a second figure, male, appeared on the rooftop below. The boy had dark hair and wore loose, casually expensive French sportsclothes. As they watched, he crossed to the waterbed and

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crouched beside the girl, reaching out to touch her. "She's beautiful, Roberts, isn't she?"

"Well," the unit director said, "I've seen her 'befores.' It's surgery." He shrugged, his eyes still on the boy.

"If you've seen my 'befores,' " she said, "someone will hang for it. But she does have something. Good bones . . ." She sipped her wine. "Is she the one? 'The new Tally Isham'?"

He shrugged again. "Look at that little prick," he said. "Do you know he's drawing a salary nearly the size of mine, now? And what exactly does he do to earn it? A bodyguard . . ." His mouth set, thin and sour.

"He keeps her happy." Tally smiled. "We got them as a package. It's a rider in her contract. You know that."

"I loathe that little bastard. He's right off the street and he knows it and he doesn't care. He's trash. Do you know what he carries around in his luggage? A cyberspace deck! We were held up for three hours yesterday, Turkish customs, when they found the damned thing. . . ." He shook his head. The boy stood now, turned, and walked to the edge of the roof. The girl sat up, watching him, brushing her hair back from her eyes. He stood there a long time, staring after the wake of the Athens boat, neither Tally Isham nor the unit director nor Angie knowing that he was seeing a gray sweep of Barrytown condos cresting up into the dark towers of the Projects.

The girl stood, crossed the roof to join him, taking his hand.

"What do we have tomorrow?" Tally asked, finally.

"Paris," he said, taking up his Hermes clipboard from the stone balustrade and flipping automatically through a thin sheaf of yellow printouts. "The Krushkhova woman."

"Do I know her?"

"No," he said. "It's an art spot. She runs one of their two most fashionable galleries. Not much of a backgrounder, though we do have an interesting hint of scandal, earlier in her career. . . ."

Tally Isham nodded, ignoring him, and watched her understudy put her arm around the boy with the dark hair.

36
THE SQUIRREL WOOD

When the boy was seven, Turner took Rudy's old nylon-stocked Winchester and they hiked together along the old road, back up into the clearing.

The clearing was already a special place, because his mother had taken him there the year before and shown him a plane, a real plane, back in

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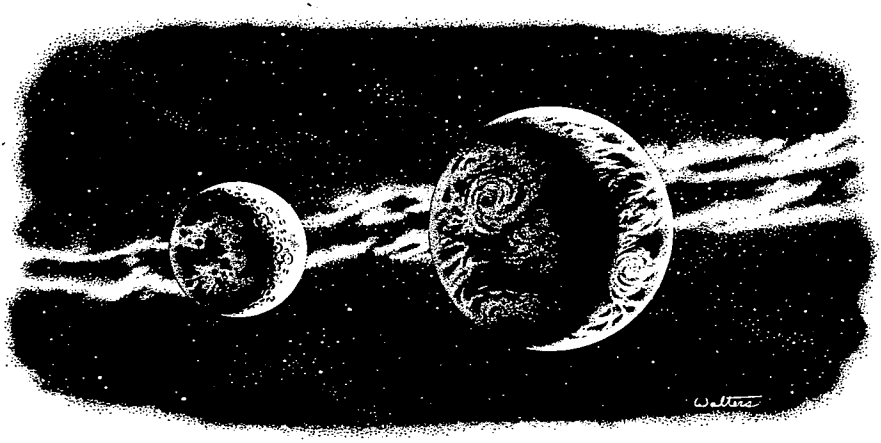
the trees. It was settling slowly into the loam there, but you could sit in the cockpit and pretend to fly it. It was secret, his mother said, and he could only tell his father about it, and nobody else. If you put your hand on the plane's plastic skin, the skin would eventually change color, leaving a handprint there, just the color of your palm.... But his mother had gotten all funny, then, and cried, and wanted to talk about his uncle Rudy, who he didn't remember. Uncle Rudy was one of the things he didn't understand, like some of his father's jokes. Once he'd asked his father why he had red hair, where he'd gotten it, and his father had just laughed and said he'd gotten it from the Dutchman. Then his mother threw a pillow at his father, and he never did find out who the Dutchman was.

In the clearing, his father taught him to shoot, setting up lengths of pine against the trunk of a tree. When the boy tired of it, they lay on their backs, watching the squirrels. "I promised Sally we wouldn't kill anything," his father said, and then explained the basic principles of squirrel-hunting. The boy listened, but part of him was daydreaming about the plane. It was hot, and you could hear bees buzzing somewhere close, and water over rocks. When his mother had cried, she'd said that Rudy had been a good man, that he'd saved her life, saved her once from being young and stupid, and once from a real bad man. . . .

"Is that true?" he asked his father, when his father was through explaining about the squirrels. "They're just so dumb, they'll come back over and over and get shot?"

"Yes," Turner said, "it is." Then he smiled. "Well, almost always. . . ." ●



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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Mythago Wood
by Robert Holdstock
Arbor House, $14.95

Robert Holdstock has had earlier novels published in the U.S. (he is British) that didn't make much of a splash, but his latest, *Mythago Wood* (published over there in 1984), should make not a splash but a waterspout, and deservedly so. It is *that* good.

It is also *that* unclassifiable and undescribable. I don't think I have ever come across a work that so curiously mixes the style and stuff of fantasy, the supernatural, and science fiction. Part of this is the use of familiar elements from all three subgenres, oddly juxtaposed and handled, but causing any summary of the plot to sound like a mishmosh of cliches.

First of all, there's the enchanted wood, a staple of English fantasy since "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and before. This one isn't near Athens; it's in Herefordshire, and is ancient, one of the rare pieces of woodland in Britain that has been untouched since prehistoric times. It is a mere three square miles in area (though, as it turns out, it's a good deal larger *inside* than it is *outside*).

It is also a terrifying and evil place, obsessing Steven Huxley's father to the neglect of his family and his eventual death; the family home is on the border of the wood. Steven returns from several years absence during and after World War II to find his father dead and his brother Chris now preoccupied with exploring and charting the wood, but in terms that are totally incomprehensible to Steven. We are almost in Lovecraft territory here; the family whose cursed obsession with "forbidden knowledge" is handed down from generation to generation. There's also the fact that the wood seems sentient; there's a horrifying sequence as it invades the house itself.

Eventually Chris disappears into the wood permanently, and Steven, himself, becomes determined to solve its mystery and learn what is in there. What *is* in the wood? Essentially it is an accumulation of the racial unconscious, made manifest. Quite literally, there are manifestations of everything from ordinary people of the past to mythical characters to totally unhuman powers, coming and going within the wood and sometimes straying beyond its radius.

Here is the science fictional ele-

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ment, since we are introduced to peoples of the past, drawn with startling *verismo*. No noble savages these; they are dirty, ignorant, and often dangerously brutal, with a few exceptions. Perhaps the nearest the novel comes to a moment of lightness is when Steven entices Guiwenneth, a young female of primitive Celtic origin, into his house; her collision with modernity is acutely drawn.

The embodied legends are perhaps even more dangerous, since more powerful; there are bowmen, knights, and horned hunters. We realize, as they are depicted, how prettified and laundered time makes the stuff of legend.

The novel culminates in Steven's trek into the wood, equipped as for a Victorian African expedition; here the overtones go as far back as Haggard, but the perils of this limitless three-square-mile territory go far beyond lions and lost civilizations.

Mythago Wood is dense, exciting and even frightening. In that sense, it is a horror novel, but the horror is evoked intellectually as well as viscerally. With all its diverse elements, it makes the currently fashionable lumpen horror novels look thoroughly anemic.

The Cat Who Walks Through Walls
by Robert A. Heinlein
Putnam's, $17.95

One comes to a new novel by an Old Master under certain disadvantages brought on by the weight of reputation and the admiration for earlier works. In a way this is unfair of the reader; the new book is a fresh object, which should be savored on its own, untainted by expectations which might be too high or too rigid. It's that kind of expectation that often keeps authors from trying something new, or tossing off a *petit rien* that would be enjoyed if it were by someone less well known.

Let's say we have this new work called *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* by one Robert A. Nonymous, of whom nobody's ever heard. It's a chase thriller; being chased is a one-legged author named Dr. Richard Ames, a retired combat officer who has taken up residence in an orbiting space habitat. While enjoying a perfectly normal after-theater dinner with a lady, a perfect stranger sits down at Ames's table, mentions a code name from the past, and is immediately killed by a dart, shot by person unknown. Richard is understandably annoyed, less at the murder of a stranger than at the bad manners of doing it during dinner.

And the chase is on. It seems someone big is out to get him—or them, since the lady he's with, suspecting him of having perpetrated the crime, gently coerces him into marriage on the theory that a wife cannot testify against her husband. They are locked out of their apartments, their services are cut off, and more strangers try to kill them; to add insult to injury, Richard is publicly accused of the initial murder. Escaping by pluck and by luck to the Moon, their little shut-

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tlecraft crashes, and after they are rescued and en route to a Lunar city, their land vehicle is attacked; there is a pitched battle and several deaths. Even when they get to what they believe to be the sanctuary of Luna City, things continue to go wrong in a big way.

Mr. Nonymous takes his chase thriller plot and keeps it going apace. Even what might be considered clichéd situations are given flavor by the inventive detail of the exotic locales: space habitats, lunar cities, and the various craft all ring true, and the reader gets that awareness of verismo SF, the "this surely is the way it will be" feeling. His characters are amusing and varied, though they talk too much; there's an awful lot of dialogue which is about the only thing that holds up the breakneck speed of the narrative, and the two leading characters tell each other what to do a lot. These two sometimes exceed complete believability with their triumphant reactions, physical, mental, and verbal, to almost every crisis, but a certain rationale for this superhuman ability is eventually forthcoming.

Unfortunately, my little game breaks down two-thirds of the way through the novel because at that point Heinlein (surprised, aren't you?) begins to bring in characters from earlier books, and there's no way one can escape reference to his past writings. Hazel Stone (of *The Rolling Stones* and *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*) turns up first in a surprise twist, and then Ames and his wife are saved from a particularly tight spot by the intervention of long-winded Lazarus Long and his entire Flying Circus (Ishtar, Galahad, the embodied computer, the unembodied computer, the sentient ship, and all those fun people) from *Time Enough For Love*.

From there on in, there's a good chance that anyone not cognizant with some of Heinlein's earlier novels might be a little at sea; it may be a plot by the author to be sure that everyone reads his older novels, which is not a bad idea (the above mentioned *Rolling Stones* and *Moon Is A* . . . will do for a start). Otherwise, those who liked *Time Enough* . . . and *Number of the Beast* will probably have a swell time with this new one; others may find themselves subject to a Lazarus longueur.

The Forest of Peldain
by Barrington J. Bayley
DAW, $2.75 (paper)

You might notice we have a very arboreal column this month, with a wood, a forest, and a tree titularly featured. Unfortunately, Barrington T. Bailey's *The Forest of Peldain* is more undergrowth than timber.

On an unnamed watery world, only the Hundred Islands are habitable, save for the large island Peldain, which is entirely covered by impenetrable forest. Or so everyone thinks until a stranger appears, and claims to be from the interior of Peldain, a veritable paradise up until now protected by its woodsy borders. The stranger is, in fact, the rightful heir to the throne

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of Peldain, but has been ousted, so he says, by a traitorous cousin. So he'll pledge allegiance to the Monarch of the Hundred Islands if that worthy will supply him with men and arms to regain his kingdom.

An expeditionary force is mounted, and for half the novel we beat our way through the forest, which consists of extremely irritable, mobile, and lethal plant life that does in the soldiery by crushing, spearing, booby-trapping into digestive acids, infecting with omnivorous fungal spores, and generally being a pain in the rearguard. These plants have names such as stranglevines, trip-roots, bramble-tangles, danglecups, and mangrabs; there's not an aspidistra among them. By the time the force gets to the interior, they have been reduced from 1800 men to fifty.

Ah, but there's trickery afoot. It seems that the heir to Peldaine is not what he seems, and the High Priest Mistirea recognizes the leader of the outsiders as the only one who can commune with the Spirit of the Lake, which is really what maintains Peldaine, and, it turns out, the malignant forest.

One goes on the theory that any plot can be made viable by a good writer, but I doubt if Ursula K. Le Guin could have made anything out of this one, which combines the worst aspects of an old Tarzan movie ("beating our way through the jungle . . .") with a bad rehash of the movable-mutant-mean vegetation theme (for a more felicitous handling of which, see Aldiss and Leinster). In any case, Bayley doesn't; the dialogue is execrable, characterization nil, and the concepts fuzzy. An SF rationale is given all this taradiddle—something about a man from the stars transferring his consciousness to the lake, and taking over the forest ("Already I experience the sexual excitement of wind-spread fertilization . . .").

Probably the last straw is Bayley's ineptness with the all-important matter of nomenclature. Bad enough to have a High Priest named Mistirea; even worse is a heroine whose name is peculiarly close to that of a world-famous contemporary opera star—Kirekanawe (as in the Maori soprano Kiri Te Kanawa). She gets her nose bitten off by a cannibal (the heroine, that is, not the soprano). Couldn't happen to a nicer girl.

The Summer Tree (The Fionavar Tapestry Book One)
By Guy Gavriel Kay
Arbor House, $15.95

Now, in another part of the forest, we come across *The Summer Tree* by Guy Gavriel Kay (from *Arbor* House, you notice). It is one of those rare books first published (in hard-cover) in Canada, back in 1984.

The Summer Tree does not get off to a felicitous start. Would you, as a sane modern adult attached to the University of Toronto, accept at face value a visiting lecturer on Celtic lore who told you that he was really a mage from an entirely dif-

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ferent world? And therefore, almost without a blink, accept his invitation to his hotel room the next evening to be transported to that world for a couple of weeks?

Not one, but five young Torontonians do just that at the beginning of the story, to my utter disbelief. They are indeed whisked off elsewhere by Loren, the mage, who is accompanied by a dwarf. Elsewhere, in this case, is the world of Fionavar, "which all the other [worlds] imperfectly reflect," no less; unfortunately, Fionavar itself reflects a certain Middle-Earth to an uncomfortable degree.

Over there, in shadowed Daniloth, live the lios alfar, the elves. Over *there,* on the other side of the mountains, is the Dwarf kingdom, with a magic lake. There's a dark Lord, who was defeated by elves, men, and dwarves a thousand years ago, and is imprisoned under *that* mountain over there. Then there's the great plain, in *that* direction, inhabited by nomadic riders, next to the magic wood of Pendarin, which hates all mortals. But more and more, the svart-alfar (goblins) and wolves are intruding on the civilized lands, and could the dark Lord be rebuilding his evil fortress in the North? Surely the magic jewels would give warning if such were the case.

I could go on, but I won't. Because if you get by the hump of the unlikely opening, and the feeling of *déjà vu* engendered by the background, *The Summer Tree* turns into an engrossing and worthwhile novel, probably the best so far of those that are unabashedly Tolkienesque.

Kay pulls a lot of original characters, human and unhuman, out of his mage's hat, and unfamiliar elements take over. The gods of this world are not aloof, and various powers begin to stir, enlisting the five humans to their various causes. Kevin becomes attached to the ambiguous, untrustworthy Diarmuid, son of the High King. Kim is taken over by the old seer, Ysanne, who makes her the inheritor of her powers and the magic artifacts she holds. (There's an antique shop's worth of magic things going in Fionavar—a circlet, a ring, a dagger, and a sceptre, not to mention the magic jewels.)

The despairing Paul, who feels responsible for his lover's death back on Earth, offers his life on the Summer Tree, where the High Kings must die, but Mornir of the Thunder takes a hand in that. Jennifer is courted by Jaelle, priestess of the Old Magic of Earth and Blood, but is then abducted by Galadan Wolflord and delivered by the black swan Avaia (a really nasty creation) into the hands of the dark Lord. Even the familiar elements are given a new slant. The nomadic riders, among whom Dave ends up, have a culture more akin to that of the American Indians than to Tolkien's Vikings of the Plains.

Kay assisted Tolkien's son in the editorial construction of *The Silmarillion,* so the influences are inevitable. The miracle is that despite

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this (and some uninspired writing, and that awkward beginning), he has come up with a story redolent of JRRT that is not stale, flat, and weary, like some we could mention.

Duende Meadow
By Paul Cook
Bantam, $2.95 (paper)

And so we come out of the Forest and into the meadow . . . just like Bambi. But that doesn't mean we're out of the woods. Paul Cook's *Duende Meadow* is another SF novel that is fuzzy in its concepts.

Seems that one of the U.S.A.'s secret weapons is a community which can exist below the surface of the Earth, not in a cave but co-existent with the bedrock. So when things go BANG with the Russians, a derelict shopping center with a survival group of scientists and technicians drops below the fields of Kansas, and waits out 600 years of the nuclear winter and its aftermath.

At that point, a venturesome "duende" (Spanish for ghost) makes his way to the surface in his immaterial form, and instead of the barren world as had been expected because of the last look upstairs some time back, there are fruited plains and amber waves of grain, husbanded by what seem to be Russian settlers who none the less speak English.

The remainder of the novel is devoted to the efforts of the duendes to finding out what is going on, upstairs as well as in the East where there is a mysterious war that they overhear the settlers speaking of. This is complicated by a split in the duende community itself (there is a war/revenge faction). The solution to the mysteries, when it comes, is less than enthralling.

Cook writes well enough, and his characters are stock, but engaging. But science fiction, as John W. Campbell made clear so long ago, *must* be convincingly grounded in science. Here, when the explanation given for the duendes' state of being starts involving auras and Kirlean photography . . . well, okay, not very convincingly put but we'll play along. But in the end, when everyone who was asleep when the bombs went off 600 years ago returns because they were "traveling in their astral bodies," my disbelief gets unsuspended very fast. If this is what the general public is swallowing as "science fiction" these days, the field is in trouble.

Beauty
By Robin McKinley
Pocket Books, $2.95

Robin McKinley's *Beauty,* after being out of print for some time, has probably been made available again because the author won this year's Newbery Award, a rather prestigious literary honor. It *should* have been reprinted because it's a small gem, a minor classic of fantasy.

McKinley tells the hallowed fairy story of "Beauty and the Beast" as a coherent novel, without over-

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loading it with psychology, ethnology or significance. She simply adds a number of inventive details and makes a few changes here and there (Beauty is the ugly duckling of the family). The results are literally enchanting.

The story's main strength is the major female character: Beauty is intelligent, sensitive, capable, and witty. We know this not because we are told so, but from her first-person narrative; here is a character fully-rounded to a degree rare in fantasy. The Beast is mysterious, somber, and eventually heart-rending; McKinley wisely does not go into detail about his appearance. His castle is a lair of wonders. Beauty is particularly taken with the library, which contains books not yet published in her age (she finds Sherlock Holmes incomprehensible, but adores *The Once and Future King*).

Another striking quality of *Beauty* is that all the characters are thoroughly engaging (the two sisters are very nice ladies) but not sticky; the only villain is the Beast, and we know (though Beauty doesn't), that that is manner, not matter.

Beauty is one book that lives up to its title.

Shoptalk . . . We're a few months late in marking a birthday, but given the time involved (500 years), what are a few months? It was just half a millennium ago (and a few months) that Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* was first published on that new invention, the printing press. If Mr. Malory could see the Arthur industry today, he'd be a doubting Thomas indeed. . . . There's a sequel to Anne McCaffrey's *Crystal Singer* now published. The title: *Killashandra* (Del Rey, $16.95). . . . For those interested in book reviewing *par excellence,* it should be noted that a collection of reviews by our senior professional in that area, Algis Budrys, has been published. It is devoted to those columns from *Galaxy* between the years 1965 and 1971, and covers 161 books, many now classics in the field. A must read for those interested in SF's history (Southern Illinois University Press, $19.95). . . . Another sequel of major interest is *Starquake* by Robert L. Forward, a followup to his *Dragon's Egg,* which was one of the more excitingly conceived of the hard-science novels of the past few years (Del Rey, $14.95). . . . Philip K. Dick readers will be glad to hear that a "lost" novel has now been published posthumously. It's called *Radio Free Albemuth*; the ms. had been found among Dick's effects, but bore the working title "Valisystem A" and was assumed to be an unrevised draft of *Valis* (Arbor House, $14.95).

Comics are not usually the province of this column, but there is no way in the world we can avoid welcoming back into print Crockett Johnson's *Barnaby,* the gentle fantasy of which may seem anachronistic in this hard-edged world of 1986. For those who have never

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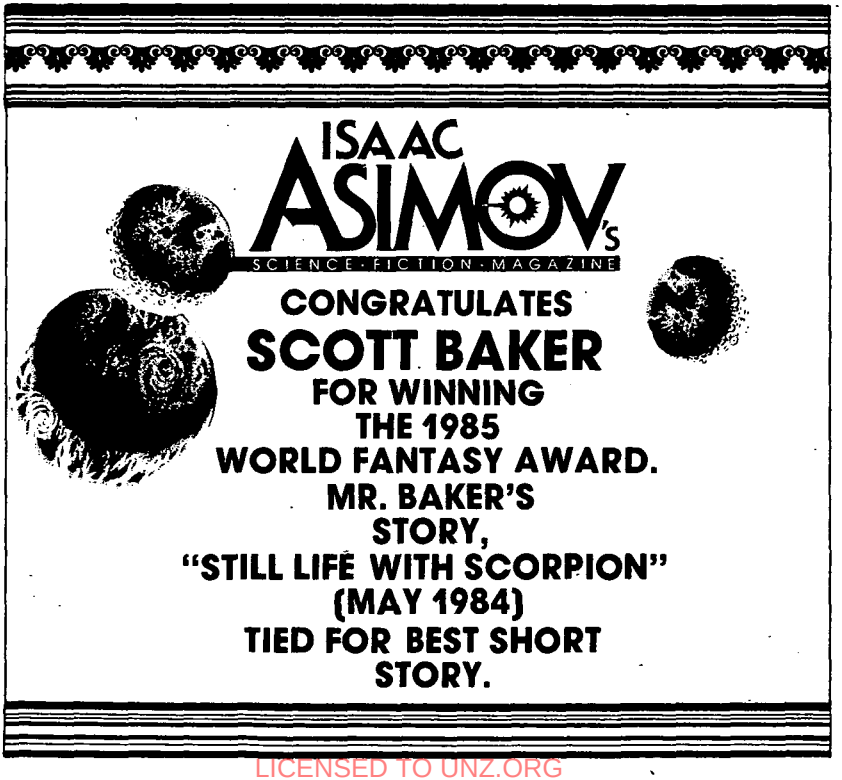
encountered Barnaby and his fairy godfather, Mr. O'Malley, the two move in a slightly muddled world of shy ghosts, invisible leprechauns, too-talkative dogs, and the Elves, Leprechauns, Gnomes, and Little Men's Chowder & Marching Society. The strip was published in the early 1940s, and achieved a cult status that has not diminished. Two books of reprinted strips have appeared so far: *Wanted: A Fairy Godfather* and *Mr. O'Malley and the Haunted House* (Del Rey, $2.95 each, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov's Magical Worlds Of Fantasy #5: Giants,* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (NAL, $3.95, paper); *Amazing Stories: 60 Years of the Best,* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (TSR, $7.95, paper); *Robots and Empire* by Isaac Asimov (Phantasia, $50, limited edition; Doubleday, $16.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●



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(from page 111)

SECOND SOLUTION TO ALICE IN BEELAND

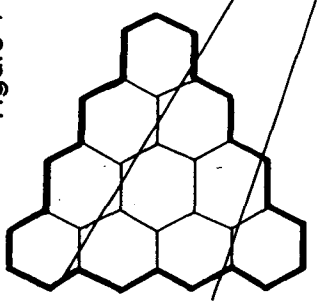

Figure 4

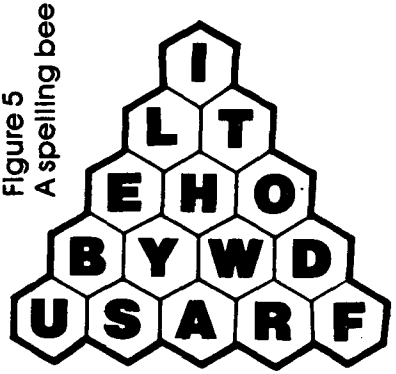

Figure 5
A spelling bee

A solution with two beelines is shown in Figure 4.

As everybody knows, bees are expert spellers. It is not surprising that many of their puzzles involve spelling words and sentences on hexagonally-tesselated patterns. In Figure 5 you see a spelling-bee problem that Herb showed Alice before she wandered off to explore another region of Wonderland.

Your task is to start on any cell, then move like a bee-rook—but only *one* cell at a time—to spell the first six words of a well known poem. You are allowed to double a letter by "moving" to the cell you are on. For example, you can spell such words as HOOT and HELL. It's surprising how many words can be spelled on this pattern: WHY, WAR, THEY, DWARF, LITHE, BYE-BYE, WAYWARD, and dozens of others.

The poem, by the way, is one of the many poems that Carroll parodies in his *Alice* books. It would spoil the fun to give the answer, so I shall postpone it until the next column.

Solutions to last month's two problems involving the end digits of the new year are:

$12 + 34 - 56 + 7 + 89 = 86,$

$98 + 7 - 65 + 43 + 2 + 1 = 86$

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

I'm just back from the NASFiC (the big con[vention] of the year in North America, held years WorldCon is abroad), with news of WorldCon and NASFiC for 1987. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a later, long list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [long] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge.

FEBRUARY, 1986

7-9—**SwampCon.** For info, write: **Box 14238, Baton Rouge LA 70898.** Or phone: **(703) 823-3117** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Baton Rouge LA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Prince Murat Inn. Guests will include: David Gerrold, A. J. Offutt, Robert Adams.

14-16—**Boskone,** Sheraton Hotel, Boston MA. Robert Bloch. Big (over 3,000 were there last year).

14-16—**Corflu,** Westpark Hotel, Tyson's Corner VA. The convention fanzine fan for $25.25 memb.

21-23—**SFeraCon, Ivanicgradska 41A, Zagreb 41000 Yugoslavia.** Free membership to non-Yugoslavs.

21-23—**OnoCon, 6-2740 Brentwood Blvd. NW, Calgary AB T2L 1J4 Canada.** A thaw-out for frozen fans.

21-23—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 251-6226 (days), 233-0326 (eves).** Feminist SF.

21-23—**ConTex, Box 772472, Houston TX 77215.** Katherine Kurtz, artist Phil Foglio. At Hilton SW.

28-Mar. 2—**ConQuistador, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115.** Moved to Hotel San Diego. 3rd annual.

28-Mar. 2—**PhoenixCon, 752½ N. Highland Av. NE, Atlanta GA 30306. (404) 475-7326.** D. Brin.

MARCH, 1986

7-9—**LunaCon, Box 6742, FDR Sta., New York NY 10150.** Tarrytown NY. Madeleine L'Engle, Marta Randall, Dawn Wilson. Dowager queen of East Coast cons, once the only big one. Just north of NYC.

20-23—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723-2101 or 789-0599 or 453-8550.** Anne McCaffrey, Kelly & Polly Freas, S. & J. Robinson, J. Oberg. Over 100 authors, editors, etc., planned. Stardance, masquerade, SCA tourney (medieval fighting), fan olympics, Philip K. Dick award given.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 3277 Roswell Rd. #1986, Atlanta GA 30305** Atlanta GA. Ray Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, B. (Slow Glass) Shaw. WorldCon for 1986. Join early for less.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton UK. The 1987 WorldCon, in England. Doris Lessing, Alfred Bester, Brian Aldiss, Jim Burns. Join before April 1986 for $30.

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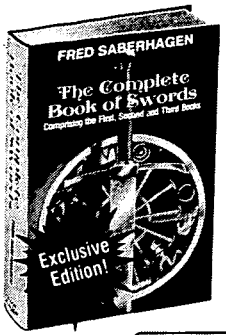

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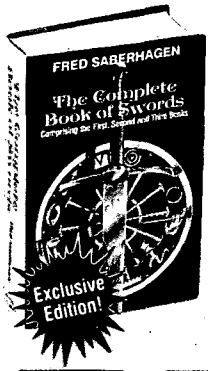

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